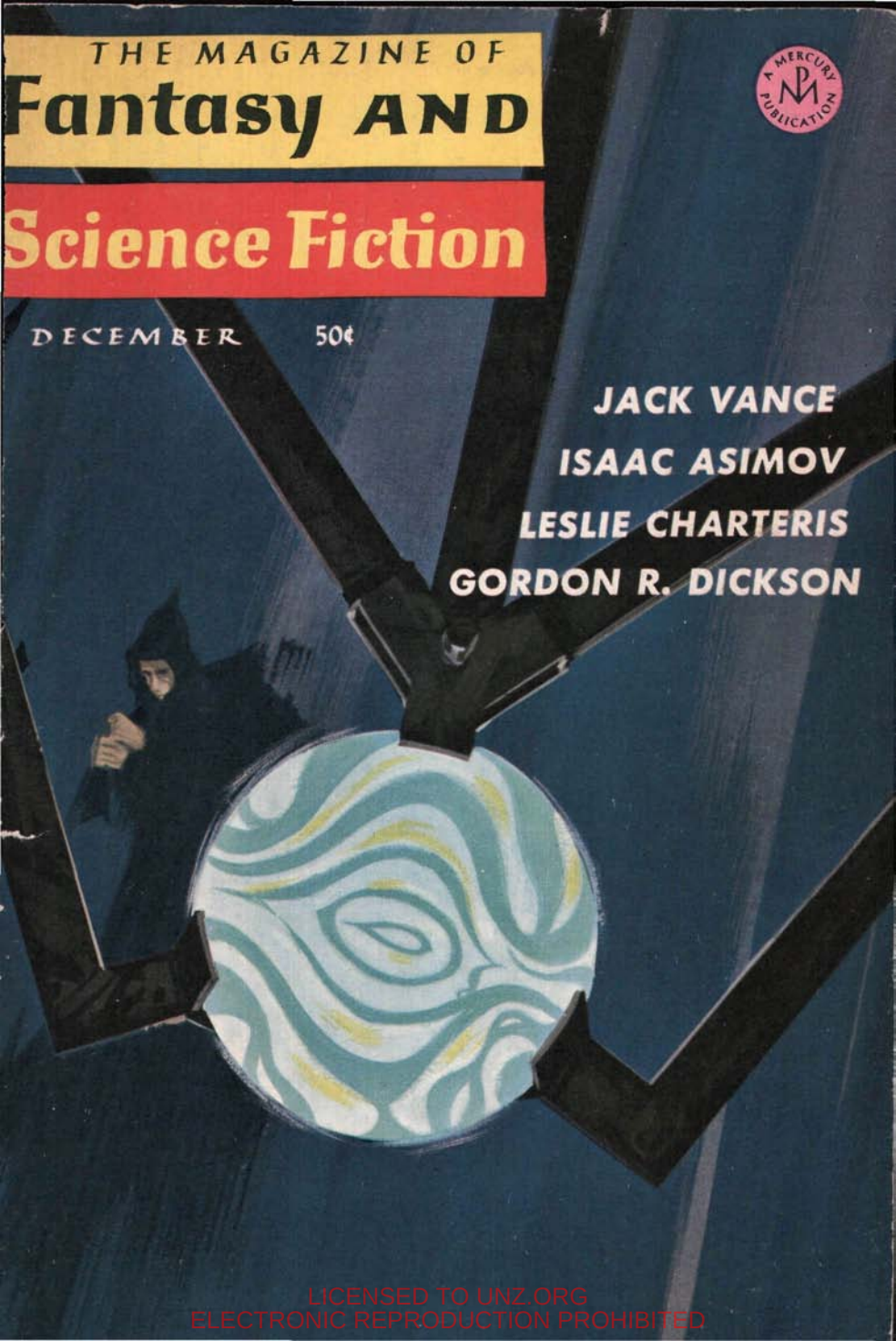


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*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 29, No. 6, Whole No. 175, Dec. 1965. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 50¢ a copy. Annual subscription $5.00; $5.50 in Canada and the Pan American Union, $6.00 in all other countries. Publication office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N. Y. 10022. Second Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Printed in U.S.A.* *© 1965 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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*Most tactical combat missions are stated in alarmingly simple terms. The mission of Breakthrough Gangship Four was to block the escape of the Kinsu fleet. No more, no less. Yet, as the alien warships approached to within minutes of contact, the Gangship crew became aware of a factor which went back beyond the battle, or the war, or even its causes—a factor so enormous in its implications that it was almost impossible to grasp its desperate importance.*

# BREAKTHROUGH GANG

## by Gordon R. Dickson

BREAKTHROUGH GANGSHIP NO. Four hung in interstellar space, one and a half light years 'down' —i.e., toward Galactic Center— from the Kinsu solar system. She was one and a half light years away from the situation now developing, as the Driver Gangships, with forty unmanned mech dreadnaughts on slave circuits apiece, engaged the mass of manned Kinsu warships and drove them back into the Kinsu home solar system.

Breakthrough Gangship Four, with her own twenty-four mech ships, was on bolthole duty. She was holding a steady position with regard to the Kinsu system, a single shift of eight crew members on duty at her instruments in Main Room and Instrument Room —the other three shifts on standby. There was no reason to expect any unusual trouble.

"—Hold it!" snapped Dave Larson, her Tactician, without warning. *"All hold!"*

The three other shift members on duty in the main room of the ship reacted automatically, damping all channels of mechanical and human transmission from the ship. But then they spun about in the swivel chairs before their instrument boards to stare at Dave.

"What is it?" demanded Hallie Suboda, tightly.

It was the question in all their minds. But it was Hallie's right to ask it first. For Hallie, despite her pert face under its dark helmet of



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hair that made her look more like a schoolgirl than a Mech shipmember, was currently in command of the vessel. Not merely because she was the leading 'sensitive' aboard—they were all sensitives of one order of importance or another—but because her sensitivity was momentarily of most value to the ship. Hallie was Contact member of this shift. In this moment when the Gangship was out of the battle and waiting, she was the only one fully engaged with the minds of the enemy. If anyone should have been likely to have signalled an emergency situation, it should have been she.

Of course, the signal was possible to others in the Main Room as well. Jafe Williams, as Coordinator of the shift, could have discovered an internal ship's problem requiring a hold. Marge Lacey, occupying the Alien Sociologist's chair, might have uncovered some potentially dangerous factor in the Kinsu retreat. These were possible, barely possible.

But Dave was Tactician—and Breakthrough Gangship Four was not even yet potentially in conflict with the Kinsu forces. All Dave was supposed to be doing at the moment was keeping track of the tactical shape of the distant battle as it developed, figuring ahead into the possibilities, for possible troubles or advantages.

"Blank spot," said Dave now, tersely. He had not been idle since he had spoken and he was not idle now. His fingers were flying over the board in front of him, correlating the physically-received data on the Kinsu situation with the shaping pattern of the insight in his mind.

"Blank spot . . ?" began Hallie. "But how can there be a blank spot?"

"Blind spot, then! Shut up, will you?" snapped Dave. He had a lean pleasant, ordinarily cheerful face with a crown of whitish-blond hair—but now his features were unexpectedly savage. Hallie fell silent and with the other two in the Main Room of the Gangship, sat watching him as his fingers continued to fly and his face to stare fixedly at his instruments.

Finally, his fingers slowed. He sat back from his board, staring at it, then slowly seemed to become conscious of the rest of them in the room. He swung his chair around to face the rest of them who were all now sitting with their backs to their damped boards, watching him.

"Oh—sorry, Hallie," he said, like someone coming out of a nightmare to realize that he had been fighting his awakener.

"That's all right," said Hallie, frowning. Mental Privacy was a rigid rule aboard the Gangships; but Hallie was a Contact, and more than that, she was in love with Dave. Certain overtones from

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his thoughts and emotions leaked through to her, regardless—and these had already warned her that it was no small thing that had made him call a hold.

"I don't know what it is . . ." said Dave grimly. "There's an influencing factor on this tactical situation that goes outside."

"Outside?" said Jafe, the Coordinator. "How far out?"

"I . . ." Dave stumbled. "I don't know.—All the way."

"All the way!" echoed Marge Lacey from her Alien Sociologist's chair. "Dave! What's that supposed to mean? It's like saying 'out to the end of infinity' or 'right to the end of up'!"

"I can't help it," said Dave, his mouth line thinning stubbornly. "I tell you it's a tactical factor stretching out beyond my perceptive limits, and I get the feeling it goes all the way to . . . whatever."

"Does it go far enough back to involve itself with the internal tactical pattern of Earth—I mean the pattern of logical interaction of the people back home?" asked Hallie, sensibly.

"Yes," said Dave, reluctantly. He hesitated again. "It goes further."

"Further!" said Jafe. His dark sharp-featured face stared almost suspiciously at Dave. "Do you feel all right?"

"Of course I feel all right!" snapped Dave. He started to put a hand to his head before he realized what he was doing, then he jerked the hand down. "I'm in full possession of all my faculties and perceptions! It's just that—if it's hard for you to believe this, what do you think it's hitting me like? I tell you . . ."

"Just a minute," interrupted Jafe. With an internal problem now occupying the ship, he was now in command rather than Hallie. "Hallie, we can't drift like this without Contact while we hold a debating session. Break your hold and put us in touch while we catch up with the battle situation." He glanced back at Dave. "That means you, too."

"Right," said Dave.

They all swung back to their boards. For a moment Hallie reestablished Contact, and for perhaps thirty seconds, they were all very busy, bringing their particular areas up to the moment in information.

"All right," said Jafe. The Kinsu warships were still retreating and had perhaps an eighth of a light year to go before they would have to break, one way or another. "Back to Dave then." They all swung their chairs around and Dave faced them across the center of the small room. "Now, Dave," said Jafe, "you've got to give us some idea of why you called this hold."

"All right," said Dave. "Take a look for yourself!"

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It was an indication of the seriousness of the situation that he should invite them into his mind. They hesitated, then stepped in. There was a long moment of silence in the room and then Hallie, herself, shook her head.

"It's no good," she said.

With Hallie's admission of defeat, Jafe and Marge sat back, shaking their heads. If Hallie, who was not only their best Contact, but had an emotional bond with Dave, could not make sense out of what was in his mind, there was little hope that they could. The difficulty was, of course, that none of them were Tacticians. They could 'read' the situation as Dave's mind saw and showed it to them, but they could not understand what they 'read'—any more than a man can understand a highly technical explanation of a situation in a field to which he has been neither trained nor educated.

"Get another Tactician up here," suggested Hallie.

"Of course!" Jafe snapped his fingers angrily at not thinking of this himself. He jabbed a stud on the instrument board before him. Less than sixty seconds later, a tall, brown-faced individual stuck his head into the Main Room.

"You wanted a Tactician?" he asked Jafe.

"Right, Billy," said Jafe. "Check with Dave, here, will you? He's got something he can't explain to us."

Billy Horgens nodded and looked over at Dave. Their eyes met and held while a slow minute more went by. Then their gazes broke apart, and Billy shook his head, turning to Jafe.

"No go," he said.

"What do you mean, no go?" demanded Jafe. He interrupted himself, swinging around to face Hallie. "What's going on with the Kinsu?"

Hallie hooded her eyes with the dark lashes of her eyelids. For a moment the more-than-a-light-year distant ships filled with squat, yellow-furred forms became more clear around her than the Gangship itself. Then, she opened her eyes fully and turned back to Jafe.

"Still pulling back to their own solar system," she said. "They don't believe they're completely trapped, yet."

"How soon until they do?" asked Jafe, swinging on Dave, who had immediately integrated this latest information with his picture of the situation, as had everyone else in the room.

"Seven minutes—maybe less, maybe a little more. They'll be trying a breakthrough in eight minutes max," said Dave.

"All right." Jafe reached up to set the stop clock on his board. "We've got five minutes then, to get to the bottom of this hold of yours. If the Kinsu break toward some other Gangship, maybe it won't matter if we solve it or not.

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But if they come this way, I don't want us worrying about some unknown—or unexplained—" he looked at Dave, "factor."

He swung back to face Billy.

"Now, just what do you mean? —No go?"

"Just that," answered Billy, laconically. "Sorry, Jafe. But you know that Dave's the most powerful Tactician aboard. That's why he's on your first shift, instead of being on one of the other shifts with the rest of us. You're taking a problem that your best man can't give you an answer on, and handing it to your Number Two boy for solution. Well, I can't do it. If I could, I'd be on the first shift, and Dave'd be on the second."

"Can you see what he says is there?" snapped Jafe.

"I can see . . . something, now that Dave's pointed it out to me," said Billy. "But what it is, whether I really see it or whether Dave's pointing it out has made me imagine it, I don't know."

"Would you be able to tell us what you do see?" put in Hallie, gently. Billy threw her a grateful glance.

"All right," he said. "It's a massive decisive factor, running back beyond this battle with the Kinsu, beyond the Earth situation behind it. And," Billy hesitated, "unless I'm wrong, back behind that into time, back out of sight."

"Back out of sight in time!" Jafe jerked his head up as if to glare Billy out of countenance. "But that's impossible. We only decided to fight the Kinsu a year and a half ago. We only knew about them fifteen years ago!"

"That's it," said Billy unhappily.

"Twenty years ago," put in Marg, "we didn't even know there were any intelligent aliens within two hundred light years of Earth, let alone that they were hostile, let alone that they'd attack us on sight."

"Sorry," said Billy. "I can't explain it, I'm just telling you what I read."

"Dave—" Jafe turned back to him. "If Billy can tell us that much, you can tell us more!"

"Yes. But . . ." Dave wet his lips and glanced unhappily, almost apologetically at Hallie. "I don't know if I should—on my own."

"Don't know if you should!" Jafe's eyes were like brown stones. "In less than ten minutes the Kinsu may be breaking through right on top of us; and if there's an unknown tactical factor it could cost us the lives of everyone on board here—or the whole war with the Kinsu, itself. And you say you don't know—"

"I mean it!" said Dave, doggedly. "I think . . . maybe we ought to contact Headquarters."

"Headquarters? Back on Earth. What for?"

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"For . . ." Dave hesitated. "A general hold—until we know about this."

"A general hold? In the middle of a battle. Are you insane?"

"No," said Dave. He added bleakly, "That's what's scaring me, Jafe. I know you Coordinators can get through to HQ if you want to."

"Not," said Jafe, harshly, "until I know what this is all about."

"I don't know if I can tell you . . ." Dave's eyes flickered to the sweep-second hand of the stop clock over Jafe's head, the clock Jafe had set on five minutes to place a time limit on their solution of this problem. Fully two of those minutes were already gone. Three remained. And, in a tight crescent formation, less than one and a half light years distant, now, the human mech forces were pounding the Kinsu warships back toward the planets of their own alien system. Soon, the Kinsu would see that there was no hope of stopping the human advance, and their commanders would try to break through and away, saving as many of their warships as possible to fight again some other day. It would be then that Gangship Four with its forty automated mech dreadnaughts would be all that stood between the manned Kinsu vessels and escape, if they broke this way. Once free, the aliens could carry on the war for years yet. Or even try to hit Earth itself in retaliation.

None of this must happen. It was the mission of Breakthrough Gangship Four, in that eventuality, to block the Kinsu escape like a lone tackler between the enemy runner and the goal line. It would be their duty to hold the superior numbers of the escaping ships until help came to contain them. For only if the Kinsu ships were completely englobed, completely defeated, would the arrogant Kinsu character be broken sufficiently to permit them to surrender unconditionally, rather than fighting to the last alien.

The outcome of the whole battle might depend on this one Gangship. It might all hang on his own refusal or inability to make clear this vital tactical factor to his fellow crew members. It was a time for clear, sharp decision. And yet . . . Dave shivered, visualizing the massive, far-reaching enigma of the factor he visualized—

"Try!" Jafe was snapping. "Do I have to make it an order, Dave?"

"No. I'll try," said Dave, unhappily. He examined the overall network of the tactical situation and the massive factor that was troubling him, striving to resolve it somehow into words. It could not really go into words, of course, any more than a situation in multidimensional mathematics could be reduced to words.

"Look," he said, after a long second of thought, "I want you all

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to think.—Consider something. Maybe a hundred thousand years ago we were stone-age men, just finding out how to make fire. A little less than three thousand years ago, about eight hundred B.C., the Egyptians were cracking through to make iron. Three hundred and some years ago, we were getting steam engines to work for us. A hundred and fifty years ago, we came up with the airplane. Seventy-five years ago, we put a man on the moon. . . . Anybody see what I'm driving at?"

He looked around the room, at the three seated there and at the standing Billy. But even Billy's eyes showed no light of understanding.

"I'll go on," said Dave grimly. "Fifty years ago, we made it to Alpha Centauri and back. Thirty years ago we had outposts on planets nearly a hundred light years from home. Fifteen years ago we encountered the Kinsu, who'd been in space since about the time our ancestors were knocking two rocks together for the first time and noticing that the pretty sparks started a fire. A year and a half ago we decided to give up trying to make peaceful contact with them, and decided to wage our first interstellar, spatial war. Three ship-days ago, we met their front line warships beyond the Pleiades, with a completely revolutionary new concept of space warfare.—Twenty to forty sensitive and highly trained individuals to each Gang of twenty to forty automated fighting vessels, as a base combat unit. A battle plan aimed not at destruction of the enemy forces but at breaking the emotional strength of character of our enemy. And a system of tactics built upon the purely human psionic abilities that our opponent did not possess."

Dave paused and looked around. They were all watching intently, and listening, but he saw no sudden kindling of comprehension in their eyes.

"Look what's happened," Dave went on desperately. "The Kinsu have been retreating from the first moment. Half an hour from now we ought to have this race of intelligent aliens who overran other worlds beside their own while our ancestors were still scratching in the dirt with a pointed stick—we'll have them not just conquered, but *broken*, and subjected by weapons of the human mind they can't match because they're not human." He glanced desperately at the clock which now showed less than a minute left of the five Jafe had set it for.

"Don't any of you see what I'm driving at?" Dave pleaded.

"You mean," said Billy slowly, frowning, "that it's too much weight of odds to be accumulated on one point of tactic. But—"

"No, you mean it's too good to

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be true, don't you?" interrupted Hallie, swiftly. "You mean things have gone too well and too fast for us, from the stone age to now—so that things have been too perfect and now we have to pay the price? Is that what you mean?"

"No. I—" burst out Dave. "I don't know—I can't explain what I mean." He looked stubbornly, grimly at Jafe. "I want to talk to Headquarters!"

"What can you tell Headquarters, you can't tell us?" demanded Jafe.

"I don't know! Maybe they know something about this factor already!"

Jafe sat for a second, just looking at him.

"Suppose I call Headquarters," he said, finally. "—just suppose it. I'm not saying I will. But suppose I did and told them what you've just told us—that the human race seems to have developed too fast to its present state of strength. And that this seems to you to create a massive, dangerous tactical factor involved in the present situation.—What do you suppose they'd say? 'Put your man on right away, this sounds vital!' —or—'Sounds like your number one Tactician's had a nervous breakdown, better replace him with number two!'?"

"You could try it," said Dave, stubbornly.

"I think you're holding something back," said Jafe. His face twisted unhappily as he said it, for the words came out like an accusation. But it was the only way he knew to run things, he told himself desperately. He was aware that he did not have Dave's instinctive likeableness, just as he was aware that Dave was—with the possible exception of Hallie—the most powerful sensitive aboard the ship. "Tell me one thing," Jafe wound up, almost pleadingly, "tell me what this factor of yours can do to us in this battle, if the Kinsu try to break through in our area, here!"

Dave opened his mouth and then shut it again.

Jafe turned to the Number Two Tactician.

"Billy?" he demanded.

Billy looked unhappy. He glanced at Dave.

"Sorry, Dave," he said. He turned to Jafe again. "According to what Dave showed me—what's bothering him can't hurt the battle with the Kinsu. It . . ." he hesitated in his turn. "It might very well help us with the Kinsu from what I read of it."

Jafe swung back to face Dave.

"I can't contact Headquarters on that," he said. "Dave, do you want to be relieved by Billy, here?"

"What good would that do? Do you think what I read'll go away, just because I'm not on duty—?"

"If it's not a factor," snapped Jafe, "that can keep us from win-

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ning over the Kinsu, then it can wait until we've won and got back to Earth and Headquarters in person. I'll go over personally with you, then—"

"But that's just it!" Dave half-shouted. "It *can't* wait until then. If we wait until after we beat the Kinsu, it may be too late—"

*"Breakthrough!"* cried Hallie, the high notes of her voice cutting like a razor slash through the deeper-toned male argument. "Breakthrough, our sector. Stations! All stations manned! All stations manned!"

She was once more in command, and her mind as well as her voice was broadcasting her orders to all corners of the ship. There was no delay in answering. The crew, foreseeing a breakthrough in Gangship Four's direction, were all awake and alert, and waiting. Immediately, the four on duty in the main room were swinging around to their instrument boards. At the same time the walls of the room itself were folding outward like the petals of a flower, to reveal a larger, surrounding chamber ringed with twenty-eight other seats and instrument boards—each one linking whoever would operate it with one of the twenty-four first-line automated ships controlled by Gangship Four.

All twenty-four off duty members of the Gangship crew were now pouring into these seats—their sensitivities now, and for the duration of the conflict with the escaping Kinsu warships, directed to the job of fighting one of the automated ships through linkage with the mech brain of the ship. It would be a cruder job than a shift at one of the four chairs in the Main Room or one of the four in the Instrument room aft, but a more dangerous and demanding one. Identification with the mech ships was almost as complete as identification with the parts of their own living human bodies. And destruction to the ship they controlled could bring severe, possibly fatal, psychic shock to the operator.

The outer ring of seats were almost filled. The four on duty in the Main Room area were still at their original duties.

"Four minutes to estimated collision area!" chanted Hallie. "Four minutes. Enemy force, a hundred and thirty-one fully armed vessels. Sixty-seven, dreadnaught class. Thirty-nine, cruiser class. Twenty-five lesser classes. Kinsu Command ordering breakthrough at any cost. At any cost!"

By this time mech control seats of the outer ring were all filled, and the crew members in them had their own picture of the oncoming Kinsu through instruments and their own sensitivities. The Kinsu on their part were aware of Breakthrough Gangship Four with its twenty-four fighting

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mech vessels; and the aliens were approaching this small picket in space with the same formation from which they had just fled in the shapes of the human Main Battle Fleet. That formation was the crescent line of attack, most practical for a superior force approaching conflict with an inferior force which could be first encircled, then englobed.

"Three and a half minutes to collision area . . ." Hallie's voice was dominating the rest of the listening, ready crew. "Prepare for timal discontinuity. Prepare timal discontinuity, all vessels including Gangship."

It was the order to use the weapon that was the newest of those in the human arsenal. So new, that it was as yet no real weapon, but a device for attacking enemy morale. It had been held in reserve for just this moment of attempted breakthrough by the survivors of the defeated Kinsu forces, who for centuries had been so used to thinking of their power and numbers as overwhelming that they could not consciously entertain thoughts of the situation possibly being otherwise.

—Such rote-confidence, the new 'sensitive' sociologists of the human race had said, must invariably imply an area of psychological blindness that could be used to destroy the race that possessed it. The belief in an unquestionable superiority would be like some small object, held ever closer to the organ of vision as time went on, that would progressively block out the perceptual area. His efforts, hidden in that blocked-out area, an opponent could prepare unseen until the time came to smash the long-held belief with overwhelming evidence of its falsity.

Once smashed in that fashion, the Kinsu murderous-suicidal arrogance would be completely destroyed. He would have no psychological strength for anything but surrender.

The crew now swung into action at Hallie's words—when there was an unbelievable interruption.

"Hold!" they heard the voice of Dave, shouting. "Hallie, you're in command, now. Call Headquarters.—I know you don't know how to route the call the way Jafe does. But call anyway. They'll have to answer!"

The crew, caught in the midst of vital activity, checked only for a second, then went on. They could not spare the time to stop, or look at Dave, or do anything but listen with half an ear. But an emotional shock wave went through the expanded room at his words.

"No, Dave," said Hallie, without raising her voice or without turning around. "—Time discontinuity, preparation, report!"

"Ready! Ready! Ready . . ."

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the answers came back from the larger circle of crew, as each one of them keyed in the necessary equipment aboard his mech ship.

"Hallie!" Dave's voice climbed a note. "Can't you listen to me? I can read it even clearer now! Stop what you're doing and call Headquarters! We mustn't stop the Kinsu breakthrough. We mustn't win, now! Do you hear—"

"Billy," said Hallie, without turning her head, "replace Dave in the Tactic chair. That's an order, Billy—"

Behind her there was the sudden scurry of feet across the Main Room floor and a sudden clatter and cry from Jafe. Hallie swung around, to see Jafe sprawling on the floor and Dave standing over him, holding the pistol that the duty Coordinator was required to keep in the drawer under his instrument board.

"Stand back—everybody!" said Dave. "Hallie, tell them to stop. No more action!"

Her eyes met his, and he saw they were glistening with tears, but her voice was steady.

"Ready!" she said, as if he had never spoken, "Time discontinuity, in effect—*now!*"

All around the circle, crew members depressed a purely instrumental switch. The time discontinuity apparatus required no mental involvement in its workings, although it had grown out of psionic researches into the nature of time. Suddenly, to the perceptions of the Kinsu instruments, the space around the forty-one ships of Breakthrough Gang-ship Four was filled with a crescent formation of hundreds of other ships identical in shape and size—it was as if the whole human space navy that had harried them to the boundaries of their home system, had suddenly contrived to reappear from the scene of the main battle, where a rear-guard action was still going on, and confront the escaping warships.

But that was impossible. And equally impossible was the fact that the suddenly appearing ships were some sort of fake or illusion. Kinsu instrument readings reported them not only as having mass and weight, but as containing the emanations of living, intelligent creatures of human size and shape.

Therefore all that was possible, incredible as even this seemed, (for the Kinsu knew Occam's Razor by another name) was that the humans had owned not merely one fleet vastly superior in size and numbers to the Kinsu warships, but two fleets. And this second fleet had somehow guessed or known where the Kinsu breakout would take place, so that they could appear in the crucial moment to frustrate it.

It was the end. The Kinsu command had been prepared to accept any losses to get even one

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or two ships free to strike some suicidal, if face-saving blow at the home human world. But in the face of such superiority, no alien ship could possibly escape; and the deaths of all of the remaining ships and their crews would be for nothing.

It was the last straw to the crumbling Kinsu rote-confidence in their own innate superiority over all other living creatures. The order to halt flashed out from the command ship, and the whole Kinsu breaking-out force checked their drive on Gangship Four.

"It worked!" breathed Hallie, momentarily diverted even from the fact of Dave, pistol in hand. And indeed, the timal discontinuity had worked. With a mechanical application of linear timal theory, the Gangship and each mech ship had evoked a dozen pre-images of itself in the position it had occupied at time intervals of a few minutes up to an hour previously. What the Kinsu had seen was the Gangship and its forty mechs in twelve different previous moments of time, simultaneously.

—And so, the Kinsu had halted. It was well they had—not because the pre-images were any less real than the Gangship and mechs of the present moment, but because the pre-images belonged to earlier moments in which they were merely cruising peacefully through vacuum, and were merely going through the motions they had already established. The pre-images could be shown to the Kinsu, but they could not be made to fight the enemy.

"—*Headquarters!*" Dave was now saying, out loud, while holding Jafe and everyone else at bay with the pistol. "*Headquarters, this is Number One Tactician of Breakthrough Gangship Four. Headquarters, if you hear me, come in! This is Tactician BG Four. Do not accept the Kinsu surrender. I repeat, do not accept the Kinsu surrender. . . .*"

He was sending blindly in the direction of the main battle human forces, and of Earth. It was a desperate, almost certainly futile, effort. Powerful as Dave's sensitivity was, it was like all such talents, geared to his individual personality. And his personality had shaped it into a tool directed —not outward as was Hallie's, in the way that made her fitted for Contact work even with alien minds over great distances—but inward, to the work of subjective insight on tactical problems. In trying to call Earth from their present position in deep space, he was like a champion weight-lifter trying to compete in an Olympic javelin-throw.

"*. . . Come in, Headquarters!*" he was pleading now, while even at the same time, elements from the main battle were driving swiftly toward the Kinsu break

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out ships, to accept their surrender. *"Come in, Battle Command, then—"* he broke off, suddenly white faced. "I can't get through! —Hallie, try it." Her eyes met his, pityingly. "No!" He shouted at her suddenly. "Don't you understand? Even I ought to be able to reach, intership, to our Battle Command. But *I can't get through!"*

Hallie's eyes abruptly widened. Those aboard the ship felt her drive a sudden call outward, toward the approaching Battle Command. *"—Battle Command, this is Gangship Four. Are you in Contact with me? Are you in Contact —"*

She broke off, herself. Her eyes locked with Dave's.

*"I'm* not getting through!—Dave!" It was very nearly a cry of pure pain from her lips. Since Hallie had first become aware of her powers of Contact, she had never known any impediment or crippling of them other than that imposed by social custom or her own good taste. As a practical matter, it was possible for her to be so far distant from her receiver that her call would be lost among attempts at Contact by nearer calling minds. But theoretically, the call itself went on forever, or until it reached its goal. Never before this had she felt failure.

"You see—" Dave was beginning.

"But I'm doing it to myself!" cried Hallie. Except in her own field, she had instantly identified what Dave had simply assumed was a failure of his lesser ability at Contact to penetrate some barrier. "Don't you feel it, Dave?" It's as if I was under a post-hypnotic command not to make Contact! Jafe—you try!"

The Gangship, drifting in space while the Driver Gangs of the main human command drove in to accept the Kinsu surrender, was caught in sudden, strange silence. Jafe, crouched to spring on Dave, straightened up. His eyes went hooded, then widened.

"No!" he said. "Hallie, you're right. It's as if we've been conditioned, somehow!" He swung toward Dave. The whole crew was watching Dave, now. "Dave," said Jafe, almost fiercely, "maybe you were right. I . . . what's going to happen, now?"

"I don't know," said Dave. The now-useless pistol was hanging in his hand. He let it drop with a soft thud to the floor at his feet.

"You wanted Headquarters not to win. You wanted Battle Command not to accept the Kinsu surrender, Dave," said Hallie, white-faced. "Why? Do you know more about this factor you talked about now, than you did before?"

"Only . . ." Dave looked at her, and hesitated. He looked around at the other thirty crew faces watching him. "I think . . . we may have been through all this before."

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For a moment there was a wash of silence so profound in the room, following his words, that they could all hear the roaring of the blood in their ears the way it is heard in a seashell held to the ear. Like the roaring of the seashell, this roaring seemed to tell them of a sea that rolled on through distances of time and space too great to be imagined.

"You don't mean just this war with the Kinsu, before!" said Hallie, suddenly. "You mean, things like this, that the human race has been through, and somehow forgotten, and. . . ." her voice dwindled and was swallowed in a sudden yawn . . . "You mean . . . Dave . . ."

A faint, sodden note of fright sounded in her abruptly sleepy voice. She struggled up out of her chair and made a faltering step toward Dave.

"Hal . . ." began Dave, stepping toward her as she went down. He made one more step and his knees were abruptly strengthless. But he stumbled one more step before they betrayed him and he fell. On hands and knees fighting the internal command that ordered him to stop, to slumber, he wrenched himself toward Hallie, reaching out as he collapsed, to finally catch hold of her fingertips. Then the room about him spun away into darkness.

Less than half an hour later, a strange, oblate spaceship coated with a surface that bent around itself nearly all radiation and signals, including those of the human mind, nosed like a fuzzy ghost up to the airlock of Gangship Four and opened its lock from the outside. Two fuzzy, moving clouds that would have baffled any eye that might have been there to see them, and speaking a tongue no human would have recognized, came through the lock into the ship, and into the central, expanded room where the crew slumbered. Small, perfectly visible, mechanicals scuttled after the moving clouds, and on orders from the fuzzy clouds began to collect the slumbering humans and carry them off to the other ship.

"Have you got the destructor?" one of the clouds asked the other. A stumpy, elephant skinned gray grasping pad brought a black, metallic object out of the other cloud into visibility. "Put it in the center of the floor, here. We want it to look like the ship got a direct hit."

The grasping pad placed the metallic object and withdrew into fuzziness of the second cloud.

"This one," said the second cloud, protruding a footlike appendage, gray and elephant-skinned to nudge the silent form of Dave, "it was this one who almost understood what was happening. Look—how it almost made it to this female here before the com-

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mand carried down the generations in its genes put it to sleep. See, how they're touching each other?"

"You sound almost sentimental," said the first cloud. "They'll have plenty of time for touching when they wake—if they still know each other."

"Sentimental? Certainly not!" said the second. "With my choice of fifteen beautiful, endearing or useful pet races to be sentimental about, do you think I'd pick a pair of these wolves?" There was a pause. "Besides, as you say, they've got a long, happy life before them on some new world—provided they don't get eaten or have some accident."

"—Or fall sick. That's the largest cause of death among replants," said the first. "But these are fine, strong specimens. If the other stock crews do half as well as we have here . . . By the way, does it seem to you they're healthier each time we replant them?"

"Yes—I've noticed that," said the second. "They thrive on this, apparently. And in spite of the genetics people saying that there can't be any knowledge leakage, they evolve a space going culture faster each time. Yes, and they civilize faster and come up with better weapons. Look at this 'sensitive' business the current crop here's come up with. I never heard of anything like that before. Did you?"

"No, can't say I have," said the other, turning to direct the mechanicals. The last of the crew at the mech control boards had been carried out, and the first cloud now directed the mechanicals to the four unconscious humans in the inner Main Room area.

"And that timal gap business—there's another brand new field they've come up with," went on the second, thoughtfully. "To say nothing of this new theory of conquest that finds the blind spot in another race's character and works within it. They're bursting with new tricks."

"Well, they'll have forgotten all about them, by the time they wake up where we're planting them," said the first. "They'll be stone age savages all over again—these breeding stock ones anyway. The ones we don't replant will fail in their reproductive cycle during their next three generations and painlessly eliminate themselves. You can't say we aren't humane."

"Oh, I know it's humane."

"Then, cheer up! In just a handful of centuries, their time, we'll have a fine new set of worlds to use with all the humans gone and the local predators, these Kinsu, nicely broken and tamed."

"—While these breeding stock ones begin the climb up to civilization again, on some new world salted with a fake of their own pre-history," said the second. "I know, But it bothers me."

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"And you insisted you weren't sentimental!" The first turned to indicate Dave, the last of the humans to be transported, to a mechanical, who carefully lifted and carried off the lax, human figure.

"I'm not. I'm . . . possibly a little . . . well, concerned," said the second. "What if the geneticists are wrong and something of the learning process does leak over, and accumulate? What if a hundred thousand years from now, or less, our breeding stock have got to the point that this last individual here was almost at, where they begin to realize someone like us is using them to clear out other savage, animal races from desirable territory? Stop and think. They could be a nasty handful to deal with, even the way they are now, if they got to be aware of our existence."

"Let's go," said the other, turning and leading off back to their own ship. "—A nasty handful, maybe, but that's all. Anyway, it's a hundred thousand years or so off, human standard. Our next generation can worry about it."

"Maybe. But *they* might still surprise our children." Following the first out of the ship, the second stopped for a second and faced the other, who also stopped. "Did you notice that conquest theory of theirs depends on working inside another race's blind spot? What if we had a blind spot—like these Kinsu thinking that they didn't have to worry about any question of their superiority?"

The first was moved by, what passed in their race, for laughter.

"I don't see the humor of it!" said the second.

"All right," said the first. "What if the worst was true and you were right. Suppose we had such a blind spot. You're overlooking one point that makes the whole question academic."

"What?"

"Why, just that we actually *are* superior to all other races. And the sixteen others we've domesticated prove it."

There was a moment's pause while the answer sunk in, and then the second also was moved to laughter-response, a little shame-facedly.

"Of course!" he said. "You're right, as usual. You must think this business of human replantation is finally getting to me. Let's go!"

"Right. Back to our own ship and forget it!"

Reassured and quite refreshed by the fact that the doubt could now be put completely out of his mind, the second followed the first back out of the Gangship, that in a few seconds now would be destroyed completely. Lesser empires fail, thought the second to himself poetically—for he was something of a poet after the manner of his race—but ours endures forever. . . . ◀

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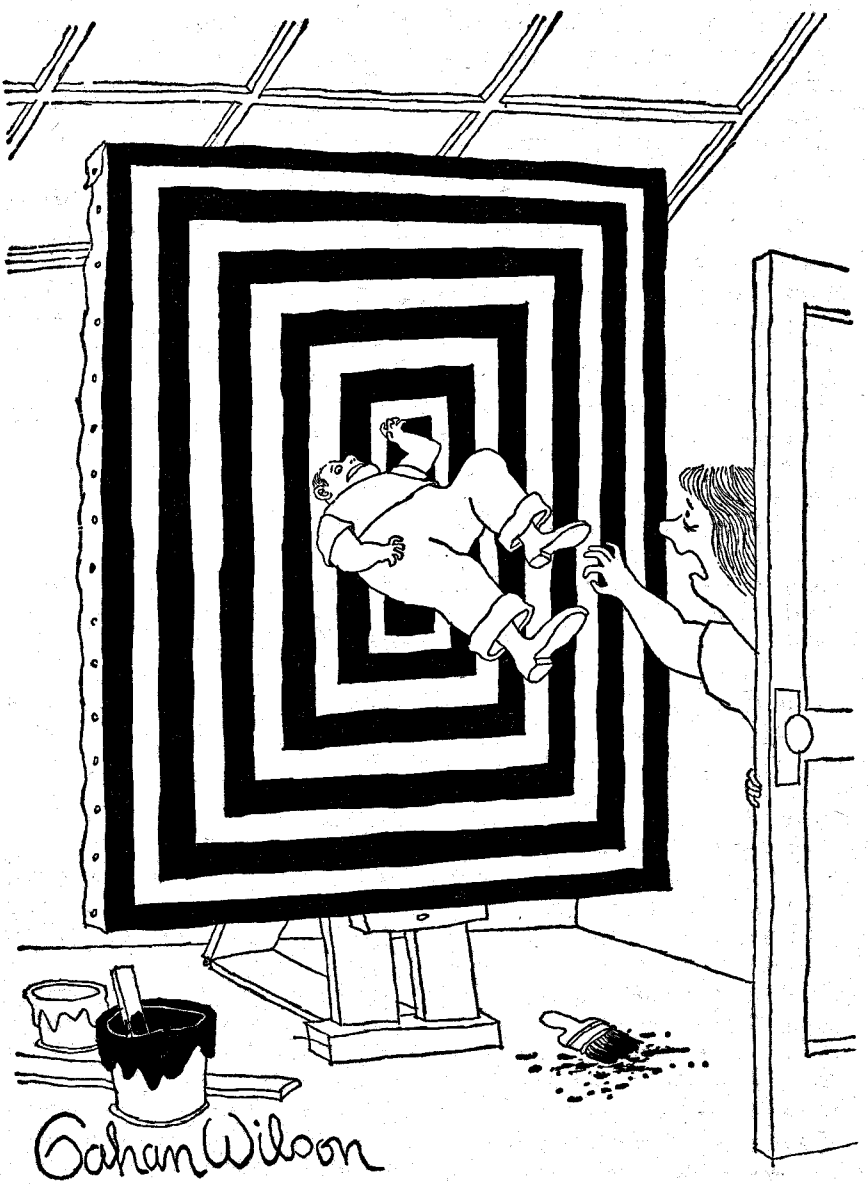


*"Harry!"*

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*Leo Kelley is a New York advertising executive whose fiction has appeared in several science fiction and mystery magazines. This story is his first for F&SF. It is about the death of a boy and an elderly woman, but theirs is neither a grim nor a desperate experience. Those who have been alienated from society for any period of time are apt to shed the survival instinct rather easily, and to greet death with a hospitality they themselves had rarely received.*

# O'GRADY'S GIRL

by Leo P. Kelley

I WAS RIGHT THERE THE DAY Mr. Death came for Miss Mattie. I was there and I saw him just as plain.

It was a day with the wind whirling down from the hills bringing rain, you could smell it, and that morning I'd gone down to the stable to spread fresh straw in Beau's stall. Beau, he's our plow horse, and he took to fretting and kicking in a terrible temper. It wasn't all his fault by no manner of means. I didn't step lively enough and, *bam,* Beau reared up and sent me slamming against the wall of the stall and I can tell you I saw stars shooting and fireworks flashing. Right in the middle of all them stars and roman candles I saw this fella what looked like a traveling man and I saw Ma and Pa and other folks I'd clean forgotten I'd ever even known. Then the stars exploded and I got myself up on my two legs, shaky though they were.

I cussed out Beau and he settled down. Then I took my ax from the shed and started out, still wobbly, I admit, for Miss Mattie's house where there was cordwood needing splitting. I'd been going there most every day, ever since she took so poorly.

Most everyone called her Miss



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Mattie to her face but behind her back those very same ones'd call her O'Grady's girl. Our town's full of folks like that—the snickering kind.

But not Miss Mattie, not her. Before she got so old and had to quit, she'd been my teacher though there were those said it wasn't right, the likes of her teaching us young uns. Miss Mattie she never did laugh once when I mistook my sums or forgot my reader and she didn't never scold like Ma or talk all the time about my affliction like Pa. That's what polite folks called it. But most said it straight out. *Dummy*. "A shame about Lacey's eldest," they'd say and shake their heads. "Don't know enough to come in outen the rain, that un."

Folks more often than not, would cluck their tongues when I passed by.

Miss Mattie though, she told me once, "The hare wasn't meant to run with the wolf, Billy Jay. You do what you can and you do it as well as you can and that's enough for anyone, man or boy. Those who say different don't know salt from sassafrass."

That's the kind of lady Miss Mattie was when Mr. Death came for her.

But not everyone was like Miss Mattie, no sirreee. Take Laura Lee Frisby. Take yesterday when I was on my way over to Miss Mattie's house. I had spotted Laura Lee coming toward me with ribbons in her hair and a genuine mother o'pearl doodad pinned to her dress. She must be far and away the prettiest gal in the county everyone round her agrees.

"Hi, there, Laura Lee," I called out to her, tipping my cap respectful.

She didn't appear to notice me so I spoke again only louder this time. "Nice morning, Laura Lee. Saw trout leaping in the lake back aways."

She took to running right back the way she'd come so I lit out after her to find out whatever the matter might be. It turned out I myself was the matter.

"You keep your hands to yourself," she yelled at me when I caught up alongside. "You just leave me be!"

"Why, Laura Lee, I never—. I—."

"I'm right sorry," she said. "Mama told me you didn't mean no harm but I'd best be careful nonetheless. And I got to listen to Mama."

"I reckon you do, Laura Lee, I said. "Well, guess I'll be going." I gave her a grin and acted just like nothing atall had happened, not a single thing. She scooted on along the path beside the lake and I made tracks for Miss Mattie's house.

And now, here I was again today on my way to Miss Mattie's and secretly hoping I wouldn't meet

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anyone, especially Laura Lee Frisby.

When I got to the house, I let myself in the back door with the key Miss Mattie had given me after taking care to scrape the spring mud off my boots. I went up the stairs two at a time and knocked soft with one knuckle on her bedroom door in case she was sleeping still.

She called out, "Who is it? Oh, who is it there?"

"Just me, Miss Mattie," I said. "Just Billy Jay, is all."

"Oh, it's you, boy," she said. "I thought there for a minute—. Well, come along in, boy, and throw up the shades and let in the sunstream."

Some said Miss Mattie's wits had gotten addled since the pain took ahold on her but I knew better. Her saying things like 'let in the sunstream' was just her way. She'd read herself a passel of books, Miss Mattie had and she used words that most folks round Elk Crossing here hadn't ever even heard of.

"I come to chop some wood and draw some water," I told her after I'd flung up the shades. "I seen how the gate hinge is prying itself loose. Brought me some ten penny nails'll fix it fine."

"Thank you, Billy Jay," she said in a faraway voice like she had something on her mind. I helped her scootch herself up on her pillows and she smiled at me. I smiled right back, almost forgetting about Laura Lee Frisby and her Mama.

We were still asmiling at each other when Mr. Death came to the door of the room. He had on spectacles that kept slipping down to the edge of his nose and he kept pushing them right back up again. His hands they were full of papers and a little black notebook and his pockets were full of stubby pencils and his suit needed pressing and his string tie was about to come undone.

"May I come in, Miss Mattie?" he asked. "I expect I'm on time," he said, taking out a big gold watch and squinting at it. He shook it twice. "Stopped again," he said. "Got to get this thing fixed first chance I get. Can't keep to schedule with a watch what won't run."

Now Miss Mattie she looked him up and she looked him down but she didn't wink an eye. "Come right in, do," she said to him like she'd been expecting him for ever so long. "The chair there by the window's softest."

He settled himself with a sigh like he meant to set a spell and rest. Then, just as if I were a million miles away, he remarked, "The boy can see me." He looked over at Miss Mattie and folded his hands comfortable like across his vest. "Do you think he knows me?" he asked Miss Mattie.

"My lands, no!" Miss Mattie de-

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clared. "Why, he's only just turned sixteen. He doesn't believe in you."

But Miss Mattie was wrong as wrong can be. "I reckon as how I do know you, sir," I said, careful not to sound sassy. "You—."

"Never mind, Billy Jay," Miss Mattie said quickly, interrupting me, though she's usually most polite. Then she said, "I will miss you sorely, Billy Jay."

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I never've been much good at company talk. I hitched up my pants and ran my hand through my hair and then the two of them took to chattering away like chickadees about this and that. I stood there listening and wondering if Miss Mattie was really going to go away with him.

All at once, Mr. Death sang out, "O'Grady ought to be along most any minute now."

I thought Miss Mattie was going to leap right out of her bed, pain or no. She studied Mr. Death awhile before she said, "You aren't just joshing now, are you? I've been waiting for ever so long."

"I'm not much for funning, folks'll tell you," he said. "Though there are some paints me blacker'n need be."

Miss Mattie sat straight up in bed and it seemed like some of her years had slipped away. "O'Grady was never one for being on time," she said. "I've grown so weary waiting."

"He wasn't all that sure you'd want him to come," Mr. Death said softly, like he was talking to himself.

Miss Mattie's hands they fluttered about the coverlet like crows when a cat's in the cornfield. "Not want him to come? Why, the very idea! O'Grady was always filled with fancies and fooling. Guess that's one of the reasons I loved him so. Not want him indeed!"

I'll tell you the truth. Miss Mattie was blushing like the early rose o' Sharon.

And right then the other man popped in at the doorway and stopped sudden, his eyes fixed on Miss Mattie. He had red whiskers and a mustache to match and he wore a black turtle neck sweater and a knit cap tilted down to touch one bushy eyebrow. He had on tight jeans held up with a shiny leather belt. His eyes were bright and sky blue and his skin had known wind and weather.

"Martha," he whispered after a minute, "I've come at last."

"O'Grady," Miss Mattie said, "seeing you now makes the waiting worthwhile." She lifted up her arms and held them out to him and he went to her. She took him in like she wasn't going to let him go ever again.

When she did finally, I thought her eyes were shining brighter'n I'd ever noticed before. "I always said you were a fine figure of a man," Miss Mattie was saying.

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"You haven't changed a bit." Then, as if remembering something she'd clean forgotten, she said, "O'Grady, I should chide you, you know that."

"I always meant to come back," he said. "It was just that there were so many things to do and so many places to see and they kept calling to me, Martha. But that is no excuse, I'll admit."

Mr. Death said, "He's seen near as much of this old world as I have myself, Miss Mattie. He's seen the fine ladies in the East and how they dance all night and sing just as saucy as sin and he's met the men who roam the world and learned how they win their women."

"Why didn't you come back to me, O'Grady?" Miss Mattie asked, as if she hadn't heard a word Mr. Death had said.

"I couldn't, Martha. Didn't you guess? Didn't you know?"

Miss Mattie's fingers tightened on Mr. O'Grady's hands. She shook her head slow.

He went right on. "Our friend over there," he said, meaning Mr. Death, of course, "found me smack in the middle of the deck of a freighter bound out for Singapore and together we battled seas that were near twenty feet high for hours on end. But it did us no wee bit of good. We were sorry to leave that ship. She was a proud beauty and she died like a queen with the great green ocean for her coffin and the white foam for her shroud."

"I'm glad you've come now when you could at last," Miss Mattie said. "Oh, I was ready to go but I didn't look forward to traveling alone with a stranger."

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Death, waggling his finger at Miss Mattie. "I knew you when you were just a mite and your sister Bella took so sick with the colic. And you were there as I recall when your Grandpa Carruthers—ah, a grand lad, that one. A stranger, am I?"

Miss Mattie joined him in his laughing then.

"Now," he said, "don't you fret, Miss Mattie. You won't be traveling alone at all. There are lots of others coming along presently."

Mr. O'Grady nodded and spread out his great arms. "Martha, there's an old shipmate of mine who's been wanting to meet you all these long years. Fresno by name. And Cissie. Remember her from the city? You just wait. You'll see."

Then, oh, my, wasn't there a commotion! Miss Mattie planted a kiss on Mr. O'Grady's cheek and threw back the coverlet. I never saw her move so spry, not even when she was chasing after the rowdies who used to trick and tease her in the schoolhouse. She sent Mr. O'Grady to wind the phonograph and she told Mr. Death to set the kettle to boiling and me she told to chop some

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wood and lay a fire in the grate downstairs. She tore out of that bed and it seemed she was dropping years with every step like they was chicory beans she had no further need of.

Before we had even gotten down to the bottom of the stairs, they started coming. The house was filled with the rustle of silk and the thumping of gold-headed canes on the doors and people calling out to each other and laughing.

Mr. O'Grady clapped all the men on their back and after they'd paid their respects to Mr. Death they set about their business. The ladies scampered like fawns through all the rooms and up the stairs, calling out, "Mattie, here we are!" and "Martha, hurry on down to us!"

Mr. Death found the kettle in the cupboard and went out to the pump to draw some water.

"This here—," Mr. O'Grady said, pointing at me.

I took off my cap and stuffed it in my pocket. "I'm Billy Jay," I said to the young lady standing next to Mr. O'Grady. She looked just like a picture in the paper. "Billy Jay Lacey's my name."

"He's a friend of Martha's," Mr. O'Grady told the lady.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Lacey," she said as pretty as you please. "I'm Cissie. I knew Martha a good many years ago. Do you like to dance? Because, you see, we're going to!"

It was true. Mr. O'Grady was winding up the phonograph.

"Pleased to meet you, mam," I mumbled, feeling the red rush to my face.

She laughed and said I could call her Cissie if I would let her call me Billy Jay. I told her I was sure I didn't mind one bit.

"Ho, there, Fresno!" hollered Mr. O'Grady to a man who'd just come in. "I told Martha you were coming to meet a real lady for a change. Now, you old reprobate, you mind your manners! First though, we'll have us some tea to warm the body and a little music to lift the soul before we all sit down again."

The room was spinning round me, or it was all in my head, but however it was I felt like laughing and then like crying all at the very same time. Everyone was everywhere at once. Mr. Death put the kettle on and the steam took to whistling away and Cissie set out china cups the like of which I had never seen and Mr. O'Grady he finished winding up the phonograph and there was music in every nook and cranny of the house, even where the shadows stood the thickest. I stood gaping until Mr. O'Grady threw his strong arm round my shoulder and walked me to the kitchen door. "That wood's out there waiting, Billy Jay," he said, "and though it's spring there's still a chill in the air. Now you git!"

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I got. Like my legs had found out what they were meant for, I started out the door. I heard Cissie say, "But, O'Grady, he's so young and—." I didn't hear the rest.

I pulled the ax from out the chopping block where I'd left it and started in on that woodpile like I had the strength of ten cougars. I couldn't help hearing all the mirth they were making inside and I wanted so bad to get back. When I stopped after a bit, I heard the squirrel chattering and screeching. Up by the bend in the road I saw Lorne and the others pelting the critter with stones and yelling. I gathered up the wood and started back inside just as Lorne and Carlie and Clair sprinted down the road toward the house. I barely made it inside, glad they hadn't seen me.

They stood outside, studying the house. Lorne was chewing on a twig, and the sap had streaked his chin. "You in there, B. J.?" Lorne hollered.

I didn't answer, figuring they'd wander off if'n I just kept still.

"He's allus in there," Carlie whined. "Him and O'Grady's girl."

"Seems as how he oughta get himself a real honest-to-goodness girl," Clair said, talking lots louder'n need be if he only meant for Lorne and Carlie to hear. "A regular *feeahnsay!*"

"A big strapping stallion like B. J. is wasting time courting O'Grady's girl," Carlie called out. "'Sides, she's been took a long time ago, you get what I mean," he said, poking Lorne in the ribs.

"Ole B. J. told me once he'd get hisself a girl when he was darn good and ready," Carlie cried.

"Hoooeee," Lorne yelped, "now don't that boy carry on! Why, Carlie, I bet ole B. J. could get just about any girl in the entire county should he once set his mind to it."

Carlie whistled through his teeth and Clair rolled his big eyes and strutted round the yard, imitating Laura Lee Frisby.

"Even Laura Lee Frisby he could get, had he a mind to!" Lorne bellered.

I knew what was agoing to happen and I only wanted for them to go away and let me get back to all that laughter drifting in from the parlor. I could have gone out and laid them all low. I'd done it once. But what would be the good of it?

Lorne started it. Carlie and Clair they chimed right in just as I'd expected they would. They could hardly sing for laughing.

*Ole Billy Jay could go to the city,*
*Find hisself somebody mighty pretty.*
*Ole Billy Jay could be a lulu*
*If only Billy had a mind to!*

They lit out down the road then, their hooting and hollering ringing in my ears like ice falling off the roof in winter. I worked hard

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at quieting down my breathing which was making a bellows out of my chest. I felt the sweat trickle down my back and I clenched my eyes tight shut.

It was Mr. Death brought me to my senses. He came into the kitchen and took the wood out of my arms and tossed it in the box behind the stove. "All this is a trifle too much for you, eh, Billy Jay? These are just Miss Mattie's friends come to take her along with them."

"I reckon I understand all that," I said, and Mr. Death he looked me clean in the eye like he was seeing me for the very first time.

"Come along into the parlor," he said, and his voice was gentling. "There's tea. Dancing too."

He led me into where the music was loudest and sat me right down in the middle of all those fine ladies and gentlemen. There must have been a good dozen of them but they kept flitting about so fast I couldn't get me a proper count. The tea stopped my stomach from heaving and it weren't long afore the music started my foot to tapping. Miss Mattie was the belle of the ball as they say. She was here and then over there and then round and over and in and back out. I hardly recognized her. Oh, she did look much the same. It wasn't that. It was that she looked so glad and, when she took Mr. O'Grady's arm, so proud.

She took to telling tales and everyone laughed in all the right places. She made Mr. O'Grady sit himself down beside her and she held her fingers to her lips till everyone had stopped whatever they were doing.

"Once upon a time," she commenced, and I eased back in my chair. "Once upon a time there was a frivolous young girl who had the misfortune to meet up with a trifling man whose eyes were blue and bright as buttons and who could talk water into becoming whiskey. Now didn't that silly child go and run off from kith and kin with that very man!"

I smiled to myself because Miss Mattie was telling us about no other than herself just like she'd told me once a long time ago.

"But disaster struck, my dears and darlings. Didn't it just! You see, the man she took to her heart had eyes not only blue and bright but eyes fixed on the faraway and fanciful. He had two feet fit for wandering and he left one day the way a once-loved tune slips out of mind and refuses recalling. She'd loved him too much and held him too tight, you see, but then she was very young and knew no better about the way of the wild wayfarer she had married. Oh, yes, she had married him all proper-like in a church with candles but when she came back home she found they remembered her only as the one who had run off with a gentleman friend. She had lost the paper that

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told of the wedding and the people called her names."

"And what names might they be calling my long-loved lady?" Mr. O'Grady asked, solemn as an owl.

"O'Grady's girl!" I blurted out.

And everyone busted out laughing.

Mr. O'Grady went to the phonograph again and wound it up tight and the dancing started all over again with Mr. Death keeping time and all the others joining in, clapping hands. You ought to have seen Miss Mattie and Mr. O'Grady. They twirled and they trotted and he spun her around time after time till she couldn't hardly catch her breath.

Then Cissie jumped up and took my hand and first thing I knew we were dancing. I hadn't ever done it afore except by myself down in the barn where no one but Beau could see. But, I truly swear, I never missed a step and I even held my hand just so on Cissie's tiny waist.

When the music stopped at last, Mr. Death stood up and it must have been some kind of signal for sure because everyone got busy washing up the china cups and putting them away and closing down the phonograph and drawing down the shades.

The talk got softer and the smiles more gentle. I felt cold though the windows were all closed against the chill and the fire still burned.

When the cups were all put away and the chairs pushed back in their proper places it was time. No one seemed to pay me no mind so I just stood off to one side watching. Mr. O'Grady got Miss Mattie's wrap and put it round her shoulders and they were ready.

The gentlemen held the door as the ladies all went out, shielding their eyes against the sun at first and then they all gathered together down where the meadow begins, calling to Miss Mattie and Mr. O'Grady to please hurry, they had a long way to go.

Miss Mattie doused the fire with water and put out a saucer of milk for the cat who was sleeping in the woodbox behind the stove and then she came out onto the porch with Mr. O'Grady following right behind. They were still calling to her from the meadow and she brushed right by me in her hurry to get along. I waved goodby to her but she didn't once look back. Mr. O'Grady he did though. He stopped to pick some daisies and he gazed back at me and gave me a smart salute. They all were fading fast though not one was more'n maybe two hundred yards away.

I turned back, swallowing hard, meaning for to lean my head against the door Miss Mattie had closed behind her for the last time when who'd I bump into but Mr. Death himself about whom I'd clean forgotten.

"Please, sir," I said, with him

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looking straight at me. "I—I want to go along," I said straight out. "To keep Miss Mattie company and all."

Mr. Death's eyebrows shot up and his spectacles slipped all the way down to the tip of his nose. "But Billy Jay," he said so sad.

"But Billy Jay nothing!" I said, getting madder'n a brown bear backed into a corner. "You take yourself a good long look into that there black notebook of yours! Why, I knew you right off and you never even remembered me!"

Mr. Death pulled out his notebook and thumbed through page after page filled with names, some of which were foreign for sure. He ran his finger down the list until he came to mine.

"Billy Jay Lacey!" he read, surprised.

"You were down in the stall when Beau kicked me this morning," I reminded him. "When I died."

He was mumbling to himself and shaking his head. "So much to remember, boy. So many places, so many people. Why, I'm due clear over to the other side of the world before this day is done and I won't have a chance to rest before Sunday week. If then! Well, Billy Jay," he said, pushing his spectacles back up, "seeing as that's how things are, you'd best run along now. You'll have to get cracking if you're to catch up with the rest!"

I thanked him kindly and I ran and it seemed like my feet never once touched the ground. When I caught up to Miss Mattie she hugged the daylights out of me and said how she'd forgotten her manners in all the excitement, leaving like that with not a word to me, her very best friend.

I forgave her and explained how I was meant to come along. "I know she's your girl, Mr. O'Grady," I said, "but I was wondering if I couldn't—you know, just till we get there—."

"You go right ahead, Billy Jay," Mr. O'Grady told me. "You take her left hand and I'll take the right."

And that's how we went. Hand in hand.

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# BOOKS

*Guest reviewers this month are Rick Raphael and Fritz Leiber. Judith Merril's column will appear next month.*

THERE IS BEFORE THE CONgress today a bill that states in part "the expansion of human knowledge of phenomena in and related to the oceans, the marine environment . . . the interaction of sea, earth and atmosphere is of paramount importance to the peoples of the world . . . and therefore is worthy of vigorous pursuit."

Clothed in the simple, lyrical prose of James Dugan,* you slip beneath the surface of the sea and begin this vigorous pursuit. His work is called a history of underwater exploring but it becomes an epic and a saga witnessed through the eyes of men who began challenging the upper limits of hydrospace long before Greek divers destroyed the booms at Syracuse in 415 B.C.

Dugan, who has lived with his men under the sea, is already in "vigorous pursuit" of expanding knowledge of the oceans.

In pursuit of this knowledge Martin Caidin * is running with the killer-sub pack—if he honestly is in the chase at all. His juvenile-oriented approach to this great new frontier of human kind has the literary style of McGuffey's Reader—and a propagandist philosophy lifted straight out of the War Plans Room of the Navy Department.

"Let us imagine," says Caidin, "that we could assemble uncounted numbers of huge bulldozers, and then we razed the solid surface of the earth, including that beneath the sea until it was perfectly round.

"When we completed this titanic effort we would find that the water of all the oceans and seas would cover the Earth to a depth of approximately one and seven tenths miles!

"The best scientific estimates state that in the world ocean (all oceans and seas combined) there are 50 quadrillion (50,000,000,000,000,000) tons of salt. If all this salt were spread out over the entire land mass of the Earth, it would extend from the surface to a height of about 500 feet!"

*Gee!*

The italics and bile are mine,

*MAN UNDER THE SEA, James Dugan, Collier Books, 1965, 443 pp., $1.50
*HYDROSPACE, Martin Caidin, E. P. Dutton, 1964, 320 pp., $5.95.



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the parentheses, zeros and exclamation marks belong to Caidin.

Apart from his childish and churlish writing, Caidin leaves you both chilled and saddened by his dedicated need to awaken the American people to awareness of the newest arena of destruction lapping at their feet. Yet he is not the perpetrator of this tragedy in misguided humanity—only the hollow chamber through which it echoes. It is a sad truth that our knowledge of the sea is meager. It is a sadder truth that most of the organized study today is war-oriented. Throughout the major technical publications dealing with oceanography, anti-submarine warfare projects lead all other research.

Dugan too sees conflict beneath the seas. But his is the conflict of Man against new and uncharted frontiers, in search of new sources of plenty for his children. He sees man conquering the impersonal sea for the benefit of all; acquiring such unbelievable wealth that the historic wars of man for food and essentials become pointless.

Leaning like an outhouse against the wall of a cathedral is this passage from Caidin's HYDROSPACE:

"Oceanography has been raised . . . to a position of national urgency because of the fear generated by the growth of undersea weapons on the part of the U.S.S.R."

You feel as though someone had slipped hashish into his Aqualung.

How much more meaningful is the final passage of ABYSS * as Dr. Idyll sums up the needs for an ongoing international program to plumb the depths.

"No other branch of human endeavor offers more adventure, intellectual or physical, than oceanography. The Age of the Abyss is upon us, and it promises not only scientific advance and economic gains but even a new era of international cooperation. If nations must compete, let is be in the constructive and dignifying areas of science and not in the obliterating and degrading ways of war. Science can lead to a better world; war will lead to no world at all."

The beautiful Venus' flower-basket sponge and the horrendous saber-toothed viper fish inhabit both the worlds of Dugan and Caidin. It is Dugan, peering over Idyll's shoulder with the thrilled intensity of the deep sea explorer, who would observe the inhabitants of this weird and wonderful world of tomorrow at our shores. Caidin would notice them only if they were big enough to register on his anti-submarine warfare sonar pickups.

Dr. Idyll has accomplished one

*ABYSS, *C. P. Idyll*, Thomas Y. Crowell, 396 pp. $6.95

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of the most difficult of tasks. A professor of Marine Science at the University of Miami, he has produced a fascinating and readable book for the non-scientist. Its cast of characters are the flora and fauna of the sea, from the shallows to the deepest trench. They live in a world of three dimensions, a world of unbelievable variations in "climate" and "weather." It is a world as hostile to man as space, yet offering tangible and ready rewards far sooner than space. It is a book about what we don't know about the world of three tons of pressure per square inch, rather than what we do know about this watery world where currents are like the winds above the surface. It is a scholarly book, yet lively in content, well-larded with first-hand accounts and apocryphal tales. When you have laid it down, you feel as though you have finished a combination guide book and Who's Who about a region you hope to visit in the near future. It has even warned you about some of the least desirable neighborhoods and shady characters who might prey upon interloping tourists.

While the forces of hope and despair battle beneath the seas, Vincent Gaddis * sails his ghost ships on the surface. He has gathered tales of mysteries of the sea like a small boy collecting sea shells at ebb tide. Collectively, they are as exciting as a railroad timetable. Individually, they are documented by outstanding original sources that include the author's conversation with a Los Angeles writer about the Angeleno's comprehensive case which in turn was based on press reports and a magazine article. Oh yes, he also leans heavily on UFO *Saucer News* for factual veracity.

To paraphrase Harry Golden's impious remark about the last Republican presidential candidate, I always knew that the first astronomer to see life on another planet would be a biochemist.

Both Isaac Asimov * and Gosta Ehrensvard * are biochemists. Both teach at outstanding universities on opposite sides of the Atlantic. Both write books. Dr. Ehresnvard is a full professor. Dr. Asimov is but an associate professor. I hope he never gets to be a full professor. It might make him write like Dr. Ehrensvard and that would be devastating to those of us who have reveled for years in the easy Asimov prose.

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*INVISIBLE HORIZONS, Vincent Gaddis, Chilton Books, 1965, 239 pp., $4.25

*OF TIME AND SPACE AND OTHER THINGS, Isaac Asimov, Doubleday, 1965. 204 pp. $4.50

*MAN ON ANOTHER WORLD, Gösta Ehrensvärd, University of Chicago Press, 1965, 182 pp. $5.95.

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This is not meant as any derogation of Ehrensvard's book. Far from it. He has written a well-formed, intriguing development of man's known knowledge of other worlds, carried to the ultimate conclusion of what actually does exist on other astronomical bodies, both within and without our solar system. But Professor Ehrensvard just can't resist overwhelming the average non-scientific mathematical illiterate with equations, formulas and jargon well beyond his grasp. Fortunately, the space between equations is filled with some of the most thought-provoking concepts of what man will find in space—including Ehrensvard's conclusion that life does exist out there and man is in no way unique.

Old science fictions fans have known this for years—Isaac Asimov has told us so many times in so many stories. As a matter of fact, My Son The Scientist has built himself two equally well-known and well-respected literary personalities: one as the lucid exponent of scientific fact; the other as the darling of science fiction fans, the man who wrote I ROBOT, who created the Foundations.

As a matter of fact, OF TIME AND SPACE AND OTHER THINGS consists of 17 science essays which first appeared in the pages of this magazine. In them, Asimov has turned loose the wonderful scientific curiousity that reflects in his fiction. Like Ehrensvard, he too looks outward. But he is also concerned with why the grass is green here on Earth and where the wind goes.

Both books tend to ramble slightly. But somehow I don't care if I lose the thought train on chemical catalysts while Asimov takes me on a three page digression as to why a Russian chemist was saddled with the unlikely name of Gottlieb Sigismund Kirchhoff. When it was all over, I learned that catalyst action isn't magic (which I had long suspected) and that Russians with Germanic names dominated Tsarist scientific circles (something I would never have suspected).

Both are excellent books. Asimov uses no illustrations or charts. I wish Ehrensvard didn't.

—RICK RAPHAEL

Although crippled by the after-effects of an astro-ambitious childhood jump from a roof, Aleksandr Beliayev * appears to have been the merrily gallumphing workhorse of Soviet science fiction between 1926 and 1942, when he died of cold and hunger during the siege of Leningrad. This impression is strengthened by his stories leading off two recent anthologies.

*THE STRUGGLE IN SPACE, Aleksandr Beliayev, trans. by Albert Parry, Arfor, 1965, 116 pp. $4.95.

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In any case he turned out 50 novels and novelets and many lively short stories of wonderful, horrendous, and generally implausible inventions.

This quality paperback, first published in 1928 in Russian, shares the radio-centeredness of "Invisible Light," tale of a blind man whose eyes are wired to see radio waves and electric currents, but lacks most of the rough charm of "Hoity-Toity," the adventures of an elephant with a human brain surgically implanted. It presents the future U.S.S.R. of Europe, Asia, and Africa as a radio utopia straight out of Hugo Gernsback's *Electrical Experimenter,* but without that magazine's insistence on technological plausibility. Radiopolis has everything from electric baths (very shocking!) to X-ray binoculars that see for thousands of miles.

Opposed to Radiopolis is a U.S.A. several degrees worse than the Germanic nightmare of *Metropolis,* with a few aged capitalists and their black toadies crawling like fat spiders and skinny ants over a substratum of workers regressed to fireless white savages or glandular freaks who can function only in one spot in a production line.

There is the usual death-ray, energy-shield deadlock, but then the evil Americans start lobbing spies over the electronic fence. Our heroes crash through, vibrate to death in their 500-storey skyscrapers the insecto-arachnid New Yorkers with ponderous sound waves, and after a vine-swinging Tarzan interlude in Brazil, track down the last bankers to their sea-bottom Antarctic hide-out and explode the earth-satellite platform from which Capitalist Clines was planning to blow up the whole world with atomic energy (hitherto unmentioned). Whereupon the narrator, who thought he'd been time-traveling, awakes in Moscow, 1928. It was all a delirious dream . . .

Billed as the first of the Arfors Classics in Astronautics, this energetic novel is anything but that. Arfors Classic No. 2, Hermann Noordung's *The Problem of Traveling Through Space* (non-fiction) should fit the description better. What Beliayev's book does demonstrate is that there was at least one Soviet science fiction novel written about the conquest of the U.S.A.—a fact which appears to horrify Arfors more than it does me, who have read numerous yarns of the smashing of the Yellow Peril and tales of the atomic clobbering of the U.S.S.R., such as Wylie's *Tomorrow* and more than one of Heinlein's stories.

This book is for those particularly interested in getting a wider-spectrum view of Russian science fiction, or who have a great nostalgia for food pills, radio waves that strengthen thinking, beautiful

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hairless big-brained sylphs in colored tunics, ships that fly through rock by cutting it very fast, and spray-on Omega-ray armor to dissolve bullets. (I no longer believe Superman came from Krypton.)

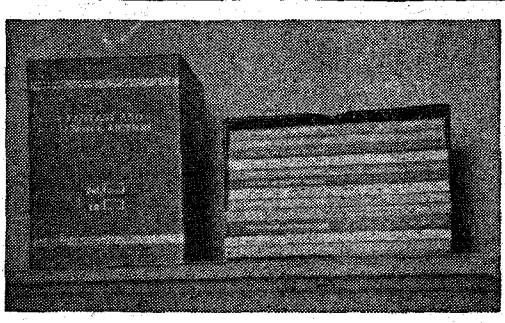
> The black gondola went gliding past the marble palaces, like a bravo hurrying forth to some nocturnal adventure, a stiletto and a lantern underneath his cape.
>
> Madam X installed a piano in the Alps. Mass and first communions were celebrated at the 100,000 altars of the cathedral. Caravans set out and the Hotel Splendide was built in the chaos of ice in a single night.
>
> . . . from the sullen throats of stone, a music rings to the bronze horizon—a strong, a sombre music, strange and sonorous, like the singing of black stars . . .

Of all the forms of fiction that merge in modern fantasy, one dark and narrow yet undismissable stream is that of the prose poem, which flows from Poe and Baudelaire to Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith.* The tiny samples above are from Aloysius Bertrand, "Bad Boy" Rimbaud—and Smith, whose topics range from love and silent gardens to bitter deserts and death.

Donald Fryer's introduction is an informative long essay on the form, while the 13 illustrations by Frank Utpatel are in perfect tune.

—FRITZ LEIBER

*POEMS IN PROSE, Clark Ashton Smith, Arkham, 1965, 77 pp. $4.00.



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*Not all of Leslie Charteris's contributions to The Magazine have been Saint stories. However, it is as the biographer of gentleman criminologist Simon Templar that Mr. Charteris is best known. Widely-travelled Mr. C. now lives in Florida, but the scene of this story is built far from thence, in distant and (to borrow a phrase dear to the late Mr. Lovecraft) legend-haunted Scotland . . .*

# THE CONVENIENT MONSTER

## by Leslie Charteris

"OF COURSE," SAID INSPECTOR Robert Mackenzie, of the Invernessshire Constabulary, with a burr as broad as his boots seeming to add an extra R to the word, "I know ye're only in Scotland as an ordinary visitor, and no' expectin' to be mixed up in any criminal business."

"That's right," said the Saint cheerfully.

He was so used to this sort of thing that the monotony sometimes became irritating, but Inspector Mackenzie made the conventional gambit with such courteous geniality that it almost sounded like an official welcome. He was a large and homely man with large red hands and small twinkling grey eyes and sandy hair carefully plastered over the bare patch above his forehead, and so very obviously and traditionally a policeman that Simon Templar actually felt a kind of nostalgic affection for him. Short of a call from Chief Inspector Claud Eustace Teal in person, nothing could have brought back more sharply what the Saint often thought of as the good days; and he took it as a compliment that even after so many years, and even as far away as Scotland itself, he was not lost to the telescopic eye of Scotland Yard.

"And I suppose," Mackenzie continued, "ye couldna even be bothered with a wee bit of a local mystery."

"What's your problem?" Simon asked. "Has somebody stolen the haggis you were fattening for the annual Police Banquet?"

The Inspector ignored this with the same stony dignity with which he would have greeted the hoary question about what a Scotsman wore under his kilt.

"It might be involvin' the Loch Ness Monster," he said with the utmost gravity.

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"All right," said the Saint good-humouredly. "I started this. I suppose I had it coming. But you're the first policeman who ever tried to pull my leg. Didn't they tell you that I'm the guy who's supposed to do the pulling?"

"I'm no' makin' a joke," Mackenzie persisted aggrievedly, and the Saint stared at him.

It was in the spring of 1933 that a remarkable succession of sober and reputable witnesses began to testify that they had seen in Loch Ness a monstrous creature whose existence had been a legend of region since ancient times, but which few persons in this century had claimed to have seen for themselves. The descriptions varied in detail, as human observations are prone to do, but they seemed generally to agree that the beast was roughly 30 feet long and could swim at about the same number of miles per hour; it was a dark grey in colour, with a small horse-like head on a long tapering neck, which it turned from side to side with the quick movements of an alert hen. There were divergencies as to whether it had one or more humps in its back, and whether it churned the water with flippers or a powerful tail; but all agreed that it could not be classified with anything known to modern natural history.

The reports culminated in December with a photograph showing a strange reptilian shape thrashing in the water, taken by a senior employee of the British Aluminum Company, which has a plant nearby. A number of experts certified the negative to be unretouched and unfaked, and the headline writers took it from there.

Within a fortnight a London newspaper had a correspondent on the scene with a highly publicized big-game authority in tow; some footprints were found and casts made of them—which before the New Year was three days old had been pronounced by the chief zoologists of the British Museum to have all been made by the right hind foot of a hippopotamus, and a stuffed hippopotamus at that. In the nation-wide guffaw which followed the exposure of this hoax, the whole matter exploded into a theme for cartoonists and comedians, and that aura of hilarious incredulity still coloured the Saint's vague recollections of the subject.

It took a little while for him to convince himself that the Inspector's straight face was not part of an elaborate exercise in Highland humour.

"What has the Monster done that's illegal?" Simon inquired at length, with a gravity to match Mackenzie's own.

"A few weeks ago, it's thocht to ha' eaten a sheep. And last night it may ha' killed a dog."

"Where was this?"

"The sheep belonged to Fergus

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Clanraith, who has a farm by the loch beyond Foyers, and the dog belongs to his neighbours, a couple named Bastion from doon in England who settled here last summer. 'Tis only aboot twenty miles away, if ye could spairr the time with me.

The Saint sighed. In certain interludes, he thought that everything had already happened to him that could befall a man even with his exceptional gift for stumbling into fantastic situations and being offered bizarre assignments, but apparently there was always some still more preposterous imbroglio waiting to entangle him.

"Okay," he said resignedly. "I've been slugged with practically every other improbability you could raise an eyebrow at, so why should I draw the line at dog-slaying monsters. Lay on, Macduff."

"The name is Mackenzie," said the Inspector seriously.

Simon paid his hotel bill and took his own car, for he had been intending to continue his pleasantly aimless wandering that day anyhow, and it would not make much difference to him where he stopped along the way. He followed Mackenzie's somewhat venerable chariot out of Inverness on the road that takes the east bank of the Ness River, and in a few minutes the slaty grimness of the town had been gratefully forgotten in the green and gold loveliness of the countryside.

The road ran at a fairly straight tangent to the curves of the river and the Caledonoan Canal, giving only infrequent glimpses of the seven locks built to lift shipping to the level of the lake, until at Dores he had his first view of Loch Ness at its full breadth.

The Great Glen of Scotland transects the country diagonally from north-east to south-west, as if a giant had tried to break off the upper end of the land between the deep natural notches formed by Loch Linnhe and the Beauly Firth. On the map which Simon had seen, the chain of lochs stretched in an almost crow-flight line that had made him look twice to be sure that there was not in fact a clear channel across from the Eastern to the Western Sea. Loch Ness itself, a tremendous trough 24 miles long but only averaging about a mile in width, suggested nothing more than an enlargement of the Canal system which gave access to it at both ends.

But not many vessels seemed to avail themselves of the passage, for there was no boat in sight on the lake that afternoon. With the water as calm as a mill-pond and the fields and trees rising from its shores to a blue sky dappled with soft woolly clouds, it was as pretty as a picture postcard and utterly unconvincing to think of as a place which might be haunted by some outlandish horror from the mists of antiquity.

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For a drive of twenty minutes, at the sedate pace set by Mackenzie the highway paralleled the edge of the loch a little way up its steep stony banks. The opposite shore widened slightly into the tranquil beauty of Urquhart Bay with its ancient castle standing out grey and stately on the far point, and then returned to the original almost uniform breadth. Then, within fortunately brief sight of the unpicturesque aluminium works, it bore away to the south through the small stark village of Foyers and went winding up the glen of one of the tumbling streams that feed the lake.

Several minutes further on, Mackenzie turned off into a narrow side road that twisted around and over a hill and swung down again, until suddenly the loch was spread out squarely before them once more and the lane curled past the first of two houses that could be seen standing solitarily apart from each other but each within a bowshot of the loch. Both of them stood out with equal harshness against the gentle curves and colours of the landscape with the same dark graceless austerity as the last village or the last town or any other buildings Simon had seen in Scotland, a country whose unbounded natural beauty seemed to have inspired no corresponding artistry in its architects, but rather to have goaded them into competition to offset it with the most contrasting ugliness into which bricks and stone and tile could be assembled. This was a paradox to which he had failed to fit a plausible theory for so long that he had finally given up trying.

Beside the first house a man in a stained shirt and corduroy trousers tucked into muddy canvas leggings was digging in a vegetable garden. He looked up as Mackenzie brought his rattletrap to a stop, and walked slowly over to the hedge. He was short but powerfully built, and his hair flamed like a stormy sunset.

Mackenzie climbed out and beckoned to the Saint. As Simon reached them, the red-haired man was saying: "Aye, I've been over and seen what's left o' the dog. It's more than they found of my sheep, I can tell ye."

"But could it ha' been the same thing that did it?" asked the Inspector.

"That' no' for me to say, Mackenzie. I'm no' a detective. But remember, it wasna me who said the Monster took my sheep. It was the Bastions who thocht o' that, it might be to head me off from askin' if *they* hadn't been the last to see it—pairhaps on their Sunday dinner table. There's nae such trick I wouldna put beyond the Sassenach."

MacKenzie introduced them: "This is Mr. Clanraith, whom I was tellin' ye aboot. Fergus, I'd like ye to meet Mr. Templar, who may be helpin' me to investigate."

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Clanraith gave Simon a muscular and horny grip across the untrimmed hedge, appraising him shrewdly from under shaggy ginger brows.

"Ye dinna look like a policeman, Mr. Templar."

"I try not to." said Saint expressionlessly. "Did you mean by what you were just saying that you don't believe in the Monster at all?"

"I didna say that."

"Then apart from anything else, you think there might actually be such a thing."

"There might."

"Living where you do, I should think you'd have as good a chance as anyone of seeing it yourself—if it does exist."

The farmer peered at Simon suspiciously.

"Wad ye be a reporrter, Mr. Templar, pairhaps?"

"No, I'm not," Simon assured him; but the other remained wary.

"When a man tells o' seein' monsters, his best friends are apt to wonder if he may ha' taken a wee drop too much. If I had seen anything, ever, I wadna be talkin' aboot it to every stranger, to be made a laughin'-stock of."

"But ye'll admit," Mackenzie put in, "it's no' exactly norrmal for a dog to be chewed up an' killed the way this one was."

"I wull say this," Clanraith conceded guardedly. "It's strange that nobody hairrd the dog bark, or e'en whimper."

Through the Saint's mind flickered an eerie vision of something amorphous and loathsome oozing soundlessly out of night-blackened water, flowing with obscene stealth towards a hound that slept unwarned by any of its senses.

"Do you mean it mightn't've had a chance to let out even a yip?"

"I'm no' sayin'," Clanraith maintained cautiously. "But it was a guid watchdog, if naught else."

A girl had stepped out of the house and come closer while they talked. She had Fergus Clanraith's fiery hair and greenish eyes, but her skin was pink and white where his was weatherbeaten and her lips were full where his were tight. She was a half a head taller than he, and her figure was slim where it should be.

Now she said: "That's right. He even barked whenever he heard me coming, although he saw me every day."

Her voice was low and well modulated, with only an attractive trace of her father's accent.

"Then if it was a pairrson wha' killed him, Annie, 'twad only mean it was a body he was still more used to."

"But you can't really believe that any human being would do a thing like that to a dog that knew them—least of all to their own dog!"

"That's the trouble wi' lettin' a lass be brocht up an' schooled on the wrong side o' the Tweed,"

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Clanraith said darkly. "She forgets what the English ha' done to honest Scotsmen no' so lang syne."

The girl's eyes had kept returning to the Saint with candid interest, and it was to him that she explained, smiling: "Father still wishes he could fight for Bonnie Prince Charlie. He's glad to let me do part-time secretarial work for Mr. Bastion because I can live at home and keep house as well, but he still feels I'm guilty of fraternizing with the Enemy."

"We'd best be gettin' on and talk to them ourselves," Mackenzie said. "And then we'll see if Mr. Templar has any more questions to ask."

There was someting in Annie Clanraith's glance which seemed to say that she hoped that he would, and the Saint was inclined to be of the same sentiment. He had certainly not expected to find anyone so decorative in the cast of characters, and he began to feel a tentative quickening of optimism about this interruption in his travels. He could see her in his rear-view mirror, still standing by the hedge and following with her gaze after her father had turned back to his digging.

About three hundred yards and a few bends farther on, Mackenzie veered between a pair of stone gatepost and chugged to a standstill on the circular driveway in front of the second house. Simon stopped behind him and then strolled after him to the front door, which was opened almost at once by a tall thin man in a pullover and baggy grey flannel slacks.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the detective courteously. "I'm Inspector Mackenzie from Inverness. Are ye Mr. Bastion?"

"Yes."

Bastion had a bony face with a long aquiline nose, lank black hair flecked with grey, and a broad toothbrush moustache that gave him an indeterminately military appearance. His black eyes flickered to the Saint inquiringly.

"This is Mr. Templar, who may be assistin' me," Mackenzie said. "The constable who was here this morning told me all aboot what ye showed him, on the telephone, but could we ha' a wee look for ourselves?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. Will you come this way?"

The way was around the house, across an uninspired formal garden at the back which looked overdue for the attention of a gardener, and through a small orchard beyond which a stretch of rough grass sloped quickly down to the water. As the meadow fell away, a pebbly beach came into view, and Simon saw that this was one of the rare breaches in the steep average angle of the loch's sides. On either side of the little beach the ground swelled up again to form a shallow bowl that gave an easy natural access to the lake. The path that they traced led to a short rustic pier

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with a shabby skiff tied to it, and on the ground to one side of the pier was something covered with potato sacking.

"I haven't touched anything, as the constable asked me," Bastion said. "Except to cover him up."

He bent down and carefully lifted off the burlap.

They looked down in silence at what was uncovered.

"The puir beastie," Mackenzie said at last.

It had been a large dog of confused parentage in which the Alsatian may have predominated. What had happened to it was no nicer to look at than it is to catalogue. Its head and hindquarters were partly mashed to a red pulp; and plainly traceable across its chest was a row of slot-like gashes, each about an inch long and close together, from which blood had run and clotted in the short fur. Mackenzie squatted and stretched the skin with gentle fingers to see the slits more clearly. The Saint also felt the chest: it had an unnatural contour where the line of punctures crossed it, and his probing touch found only sponginess where there should have been a hard cage of ribs.

His eyes met Mackenzie's across the pitifully mangled form.

"That would be quite a row of teeth," he remarked.

"Aye," said the Inspector grimly. "But what live here that has a mouth like that?"

They straightened up and surveyed the immediate surroundings. The ground here, only a stride or two from the beach, which in turn was less than a yard wide, was so moist that it was soggy, and pockets of muddy liquid stood in the deeper indentations with which it was plentifully rumpled. The carpet of coarse grass made individual impressions difficult to identify, but three or four shoe-heel prints could be positively distinguished.

"I'm afraid I made a lot of those tracks," Bastion said. "I know you're not supposed to go near anything, but all I could think of at the time was seeing if *he* was still alive and if I could do anything for him. The constable tramped around a bit too, when he was here." He pointed past the body. "But neither of us had anything to do with those marks there."

Close to the beach was a place where the turf looked as if it had been raked by something with three gigantic claws. One talon had caught in the roots of a tuft of grass and torn it up bodily: the clump lay on the pebbles at the water's edge. Aside from that, the claws had left three parallel grooves, about four inches apart and each about half an inch wide. They dug into the ground at their upper ends to a depth of more than two inches, and dragged back towards the lake for a length of about ten inches as they tapered up.

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Simon and Mackenzie stood on the pebbles to study the marks. Simon spanning them experimentally with his fingers while the detective took exact measurements with a tape and entered them in his notebook.

"Anything wi' a foot big enough to carry claws like that," Mackenzie said , "I'd no' wish to ha' comin' after me."

"Well, they call it a Monster, don't they?" said the Saint dryly. "It wouldn't impress anyone if it made tracks like a mouse."

Mackenzie unbent his knees stiffly, shooting the Saint a distrustful glance, and turned to Bastion.

"When did ye find all this, sir?" he asked.

"I suppose it was about six o'clock," Bastion said. "I woke up before dawn and couldn't get to sleep again, so I decided to try a little early fishing. I got up as soon as it was light—"

"Ye didna hear any noise before that?"

"No."

"It couldna ha' been the dog barkin' that woke ye?"

"Not that I'm aware of. And my wife is a very light sleeper, and she didn't hear anything. But I was rather surprised when I didn't see the dog outside. He doesn't sleep in the house, but he's always waiting on the doorstep in the morning. However, I came on down here—and that's how I found him."

"And you didn't see anything else?" Simon asked. "In the lake, I mean."

"No. I didn't see the Monster. And when I looked for it, there wasn't a ripple on the water. Of course, the dog may have been killed some time before, though his body was still warm."

"Mr. Bastion," Mackenzie said, "do *ye* believe it was the Monster that killed him?"

Bastion looked at him and at the Saint.

"I'm not a superstitious man," he replied. "But if it wasn't a monster of some kind, what else could it have been?"

The Inspector closed his notebook with a snap that seemed to be echoed by his clamping lips. It was evident that he felt that the situation was wandering far outside his professional province. He scowled at the Saint as though he expected Simon to do something about it.

"It might be interesting," Simon said thoughtfully, "if we got a vet to do a post-mortem."

"What for?" Bastion demanded brusquely.

"Let's face it," said the Saint. "Those claw marks *could* be fakes. And the dog *could* have been mashed up with some sort of club —even a club with spikes set in it to leave wounds that'd look as if they were made by teeth. But by all accounts, no one could have got near enough to the dog to do that without him barking. *Unless the*

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*dog was doped first.* So before we go overboard on this Monster theory, I'd like to rule everything else out. An autopsy would do that."

Bastion rubbed his scrubby moustache.

"I see your point. Yes, that might be a good idea."

He helped them to shift the dog on to the sack which had previously covered it, and Simon and Mackenzie carried it between them back to the driveway and laid it in the boot of the detective's car.

"D'ye think we could ha' a wurrd wi' Mrs. Bastion, sir?" Mackenzie asked, wiping his hands on a clean rag and passing it to the Saint.

"I suppose so," Bastion assented dubiously. "Although she's pretty upset about this, as you can imagine. It was really her dog more than mine. But come in, and I'll see if she'll talk to you for a minute."

But Mrs. Bastion herself settled that by meeting them in the hall, and she made it obvious that she had been watching them from a window.

"What are they doing with Golly Noel?" she greeted her husband wildly. "Why are they taking him away?"

"They want to have him examined by a doctor, dear."

Bastion went on to explain why, until she interrupted him again:

"Then don't let them bring him back. It's bad enough to have seen him the way he is, without having to look at him dissected." She turned to Simon and Mackenzie. "You must understand how I feel. Golly was like a son to me. His name was really Goliath—I called him that because he was so big and fierce, but actually he was a pushover when you got on the right side of him."

Words came from her in a driving torrent that suggested the corollary of a power-house. She was a big-boned strong-featured woman who made no attempt to minimize any of her probable forty-five years. Her blonde hair was unwaved and pulled back into a tight bun, and her blue eyes were set in a nest of wrinkles that would have been called characterful on an outdoor man. Her lipstick, which needed renewing, had a slapdash air of being her one impatient concession to feminine artifice. But Bastion put a soothing arm around her as solicitously as if she had been a dimpled bride.

"I'm sure these officers will have him buried for us, Eleanor," he said. "But while they're here I think they wanted to ask you something."

"Only to comfairrm what Mr. Bastion told us, ma'am," said Mackenzie. "That ye didna hear an disturrbance last night."

"Absolutely not. And if Golly had made a sound, I should have heard him. I always do. Why are you trying so hard to get around the

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facts? It's as plain as a pikestaff that the Monster did it."

"Some monsters have two legs," Simon remarked.

"And I suppose you're taught not to believe in any other kind. Even with the evidence under your very eyes."

"I mind a time when some other footprints were found, ma'am", Mackenzie put in deferentially, "which turned oot to be a fraud."

"I know exactly what you're referring to. And that stupid hoax made a lot of idiots disbelieve the authentic photograph which was taken just before it, and refuse to accept an even better picture that was taken by a thoroughly reputable London surgeon about four months later. I know what I'm talking about. As a matter of fact, the reason we took this house was mainly because I'm hoping to discover the Monster."

Two pairs of eyebrows shot up and lowered almost in unison, but it was the Saint who spoke for Mackenzie as well as himself.

"How would you do that, Mrs. Bastion?" he inquired with some circumspection. "If the Monster has been well known around here for a few centuries, at least to everyone who believes in him—"

"It still hasn't been scientifically and officially established. I'd like to have the credit for doing that, beyond any shadow of doubt, and naming it *monstrum eleanoris*."

"Probably you gentlemen don't know it," Bastion elucidated, with a kind of quaintly protective pride, "but Mrs. Bastion is a rather distinguished naturalist. She's hunted every kind of big game there is, and even holds a couple of world's records."

"But I never had a trophy as important as this would be," his better half took over again. "I expect you think I'm a little cracked—that there couldn't really be any animal of any size in the world that hasn't been discovered by this time. Tell them the facts of life, Noel."

Bastion cleared his throat like a schoolboy preparing to recite, and said with much the same awkward air: "The gorilla was only discovered in 1847, the giant panda in 1869, and the okapi wasn't discovered till 1901. Of course explorers brought back rumours of them, but people thought they were just native fairy tales. And you yourselves probably remember reading about the first coelacanth being caught. That was only in 1938."

"So why shouldn't there still be something else left that I could be the first to prove?" Eleanor Bastion concluded for him. "The obvious thing to go after, I suppose, was the Abominable Snowman; but Mr. Bastion can't stand high altitudes. So I'm making do with the Loch Ness Monster."

Inspector Mackenzie, who had

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for some time been looking progressively more confused and impatient in spite of his politely valiant efforts to conceal the fact, finally managed to interrupt the antiphonal barrage of what he could only be expected to regard as delirious irrelevancies.

"All that I'm consairned wi,' ma'am," he said heavily, "is tryin' to detairrmine whether there's a human felon to be apprehended. If it should turrn oot to be a monster, as ye're thinkin', it wadna be in my jurisdeection. However, in that case, pairhaps Mr. Templar, who is no' a police officer, could be o' more help to ye."

"Templar," Bastion repeated slowly. "I feel as if I ought to recognize that name, now, but I was rather preoccupied with something else when I first heard it."

"Do you have a halo on you somewhere?" quizzed Mrs. Bastion, the huntress, in a tone which somehow suggested the aiming of a gun.

"Sometimes."

"Well, by Jove!" Bastion said. "I should've guessed it, of course, if I'd been thinking about it. You didn't sound like a policeman."

Mackenzie winced faintly, but both the Bastions were too openly absorbed in re-appraising the Saint to notice it.

Simon Templar should have been hardened to that kind of scrutiny, but as the years went on it was beginning to cause him a mixture of embarrassment and petty irritation. He wished that new acquaintances could dispense with the reactions and stay with their original problems.

He said, rather roughly: "It's just my bad luck that Mackenzie caught me as I was leaving Inverness. I was on my way to Loch Lomond, like any innocent tourist, to find out how bonnie the banks actually are. He talked me into taking the low road instead of the high road, and stopping here to stick my nose into your problem."

"But that's perfectly wonderful!" Mrs. Bastion announced like a bugle. "Noel, ask him to stay the night. I mean, for the week-end. Or for the rest of the week, if he can spare the time."

"Why—er—yes," Baston concurred obediently. "Yes, of course. We'd be delighted. The Saint ought to have some good ideas about catching a monster."

Simon regarded him coolly, aware of the invisible glow of slightly malicious expectation emanating from Mackenzie, and made a reckless instant decision.

"Thank you," he said. "I'd love it. I'll bring in my things, and Mac can be on his way."

He sauntered out without further palaver, happily conscious that only Mrs. Bastion had not been moderately rocked by his casual acceptance.

They all ask for it, he thought. Cops and civilians alike, as soon as they hear the name. Well, let's

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oblige them. And see how they like whatever comes of it.

Mackenzie followed him outside, with a certain ponderous dubiety which indicated that some of the joke had already evaporated.

"Ye'll ha' no authorrity in this, ye underrstand," he emphasized, "except the rights o' any private investigator—which are no' the same in Scotland as in America, to judge by some o' the books I've read."

"I shall try very hard not to gang agley," Simon assured him. "Just phone me the result of the P.M. as soon as you possibly can. And while you're waiting for it, you might look up the law about shooting monsters. See if one has to take out a special licence, or anything like that."

He watched the detective drive away, and went back in with his two-suiter. He felt better already, with no official eyes and ears absorbing his most trivial responses. And it would be highly misleading to say that he found the bare facts of the case, as they had been presented to him, utterly banal and boring.

Noel Bastion showed him to a small but comfortable room upstairs, with a window that faced towards the home of Fergus Clanraith but which also afforded a sidelong glimpse of the loch. Mrs. Bastion was already busy there, making up the bed.

"You can't get any servants in a place like this," she explained. "I'm lucky to have a woman who bicycles up from Fort Augustus once a week to do the heavy cleaning. They all want to stay in the towns where they can have what they think of as a bit of life."

Simon looked at Bastion innocuously and remarked: "You're lucky to find a secretary right on the spot like the one I met up the road."

"Oh, you mean Annie Clanraith." Bastion scrubbed a knuckle on his upper lip. "Yes. She was working in Liverpool, but she came home at Christmas to spend the holidays with her father. I had to get some typing done in a hurry, and she helped me out. It was Clanraith who talked her into staying. I couldn't pay her as much as she'd been earning in Liverpool, but he pointed out that she'd end up with just as much in her pocket if she didn't have to pay for board and lodging, which he'd give her if she kept house. He's a widower, so it's not a bad deal for him."

"Noel's a writer," Mrs. Bastion said. "His big book isn't finished yet, but he works on it all the time."

"It's a life of Wellington," said the writer. "It's never been done, as I think it should be, by a professional soldier."

"Mackenzie didn't tell me anything about your background," said the Saint. "What should he have called you—Colonel?"

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"Only Major. But that was in the Regular Army."

Simon did not miss the faintly defensive tone of the addendum. But the silent calculation he made was that the pension of a retired British Army Major, unless augmented by some more commercial form of authorship than an unfinished biography of distinctly limited appeal, would not finance enough big-game safaris to earn an ambitious huntress a great reputation.

"There," said Mrs. Bastion finally. "Now, if you'd like to settle in and make yourself at home, I'll have some tea ready in five minutes."

The Saint had embarked on his Scottish trip with an open mind and an attitude of benevolent optimism, but if anyone had prophesied that it would lead to him sipping tea in the drawing-room of two practically total strangers, with his valise unpacked in their guest bedroom, and solemnly chatting about a monster as if it were as real as a monkey, he would probably have been mildly derisive. His hostess, however, was obsessed with the topic.

"Listen to this," she said, fetching a well-worn volume from a bookcase. "It's a quotation from the biography of St. Columba, written about the middle of the seventh century. It tells about his visit to Inverness some hundred years before, and it says *he was obliged to cross the water of Nesa; and when he had come to the bank he sees some of the inhabitants bringing an unfortunate fellow whom, as those who were bringing him related, a little while before some aquatic monster seized and savagely bit while he was swimming. . . . The blessed man orders one of his companions to swim out and bring him from over the water a coble . . . Lugne Mocumin without delay takes off his clothes except his tunic and casts himself into the water. But the monster comes up and moves towards the man as he swam. . . . The blessed man, seeing it, commanded the ferocious monster saying, 'Go thou no further nor touch the man; go back at once.' Then on hearing this word of the Saint the monster was terrified and fled away again more quickly than if it had been dragged off by ropes.*"

"I must try to remember that formula," Simon murmured, "and hope the Monster can't tell one Saint from another."

" 'Monster' is really a rather stupid name for it," Mrs. Bastion said. "It encourages people to be illogical about it. Actually, in the old days the local people called it *an Niseag*, which is simply the name 'Ness' in Gaelic with a feminine diminutive ending. You could literally translate it as 'Nessie'."

"That does sound a lot cuter," Simon agreed. "If you forget how it plays with dogs."

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Eleanor Bastion's weathered face went pale, but the muscles under the skin did not flinch.

"I haven't forgotten Golly. But I was trying to keep my mind off him."

"Assuming this beastie does exist," said the Saint, "how did it get here?"

"Why did it have to 'get' here at all? I find it easier to believe that it always was here. The loch is 750 feet deep, which is twice the mean depth of the North Sea. *An Niseag* is a creature that obviously prefers the depths and only comes to the surface occasionally. I think its original home was always at the bottom of the loch, and it was trapped there when some prehistoric geological upheaval cut off the loch from the sea."

"And it's lived there ever since —for how many million years?"

"Not the original ones—I suppose we must assume at least a couple. But their descendants. Like many primitive creatures, it probably lives to a tremendous age."

"What do you think it is?"

"Most likely something of the plesiosaurus family. The descriptions sound more like that than anything—large body, long neck, paddle-like legs. Some people claim to have seen stumpy projections on its head, rather like the horns of a snail, which aren't part of the usual reconstruction of a plesiosaurus. But after all, we've never seen much of a pleiosaurus except its skeleton. You wouldn't know exactly what a snail looked like if you'd only seen its shell."

"But if Nessie has been here all this time, why wasn't she reported much longer ago?"

"She was. You heard that story about St. Columba. And if you think only modern observations are worth paying attention to, several reliable sightings were recorded from 1871 onwards."

"But there was no motor road along the loch until 1933," Bastion managed to contribute at last, "and a trip like you made today would have been quite an expedition. So there weren't many witnesses about until fairly recently, of the type that scientists would take seriously."

Simon lighted a cigarette. The picture was clear enough. Like the flying saucers, it depended on what you wanted to believe—and whom.

Except that here there was not only fantasy to be thought of. There could be felony.

"What would you have to do to make it an official discovery?"

"We have movie and still cameras with the most powerful telephoto lenses you can buy," said the woman. "I spend eight hours a day simply watching the lake, just like anyone might put in at a regular job, but I vary the times of day systematically. Noel sometimes puts in a few hours as well. We have a view for several miles in

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both directions, and by the law of averages *an Niseag* must come up eventually in the area we're covering. Whenever that happens, our lenses will get close-up pictures that'll show every detail beyond any possibility of argument. It's simply a matter of patience, and when I came here I made up my mind that I'd spend ten years on it if necessary."

"And now," said the Saint, "I guess you're more convinced than ever that you're on the right track and the scent is hot."

Mrs. Bastion looked him in the eyes with terrifying equanimity.

"Now," she said, "I'm going to watch with a Weatherby Magnum as well as the cameras. *An Niseag* can't be much bigger than an elephant, and it isn't any more bullet-proof. I used to think it'd be a crime to kill the last survivor of a species, but since I saw what it did to poor Golly I'd like to have it as a trophy as well as a picture."

There was much more of this conversation, but nothing that would not seem repetitious in verbatim quotation. Mrs. Bastion had accumulated numerous other books on the subject, from any of which she was prepared to read excerpts in support of her convictions.

It was hardly eight-thirty, however, after a supper of cold meat and salad, when she announced that she was going to bed.

"I want to get up at two o'clock and be out at the loch well before daylight—the same time when that thing must have been there this morning."

"Okay," said the Saint. "Knock on my door, and I'll go with you."

He remained to accept a nightcap of Peter Dawson, which seemed to taste especially rich and smooth in the land where they made it. Probably this was his imagination, but it gave him a pleasant feeling of drinking the wine of the country on its own home ground.

"If you're going to be kind enough to look after her, I may sleep a bit later," Bastion said. "I must get some work done on my book tonight, while there's a little peace and quiet. Not that Eleanor can't take care of herself better than most women, but I wouldn't like her being out there alone after what's happened."

"You're thoroughly sold on this monster yourself, are you?"

The other stared into his glass.

"It's the sort of thing that all my instincts and experience would take with a grain of salt. But you've seen for yourself that it isn't easy to argue with Eleanor. And I must admit that she makes a terrific case for it. But until this morning I was keeping an open mind."

"And now it isn't so open?"

"Quite frankly, I'm pretty shaken. I feel it's got to be settled now, one way or the other. Perhaps you'll have some luck tomorrow."

It did in fact turn out to be a

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vigil that gave Simon goose-pimples, but they were caused almost entirely by the pre-dawn chill of the air. Daylight came slowly, through a grey and leaky-looking overcast. The lake remained unruffled, guarding its secrets under a pale pearly glaze.

"I wonder what we did wrong," Mrs. Bastion said at last, when the daylight was as broad as the clouds evidently intended to let it become. "The thing should have come back to where it made its last kill. Perhaps if we hadn't been so sentimental we should have left Golly right where he was and built a *machan* over him where we could have stood watch in turns."

Simon was not so disappointed. Indeed, if a monster had actually appeared almost on schedule under their expectant eyes, he would have been inclined to sense the hand of a Hollywood B-picture producer rather than the finger of Fate.

"As you said yesterday, it's a matter of patience," he observed philosophically. "But the odds are that the rest of your eight hours, now, will be just routine. So if you're not nervous I'll ramble around a while."

His rambling had brought him no nearer to the house than the orchard when the sight of a coppery-rosy head on top of a shapely free-swinging figure made his pulse fluctuate enjoyably with a reminder of the remotely possible promise of romantic compensation that had started to warm his interest the day before.

Annie Clanraith's smile was so eager and happy to see him that he might have been an old and close friend who had been away for a long time.

"Inspector Mackenzie told my father he'd left you here. I'm so glad you stayed!"

"I'm glad you're glad," said the Saint, and against her ingenuous sincerity it was impossible to make the reply sound even vestigially sceptical. "But what made it so important?"

"Just having someone new and alive to talk to. You haven't stayed long enough to find out how bored you can be here."

"But you've got a job that must be a little more attractive than going back to an office in Liverpool."

"Oh, it's not bad. And it helps to make father comfortable. And it's nice to live in such beautiful scenery, I expect you'll say. But I read books and I look at the TV, and I can't stop having my silly dreams."

"A gal like you," he said teasingly, "should have her hands full, fighting off other dreamers."

"All I get my hands full of is pages and pages of military strategy, about a man who only managed to beat Napoleon. But at least Napoleon had Josephine. The only thing Wellington gave his name to was an old boot."

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Simon clucked sympathetically.

"He may have had moments with his boots off, you know. Or has your father taught you to believe nothing good of anyone who was ever born south of the Tweed?"

"You must have thought it was terrible, the way he talked about Mr. Bastion. And he's so nice, isn't he? It's too bad he's married!"

"Maybe his wife doesn't think so."

"I mean, I'm a normal girl and I'm not old-fashioned, and the one thing I do miss here is a man to fight off. In fact, I'm beginning to feel that if one did come along I wouldn't even struggle."

"You sound as if that Scottish song was written about you," said the Saint, and he sang softly:

*"Ilka lassie has her laddie,*
*Ne'er a ane ha' I;*
*But all the lads they smile at me,*
*Comin' through the rye."*

She laughed.

"Well, at least you smiled at me, and that makes today look a little better."

"Where were you going?"

"To work. I just walked over across the fields—it's much shorter than by the lane."

Now that she mentioned it, he could see a glimpse of the Clanraith house between the trees. He turned and walked with her through the untidy little garden towards the Bastions' entrance.

"I'm sorry that stops me offering to take you on a picnic."

"I don't have any luck, do I? There's a dance in Fort Augustus tomorrow night, and I haven't been dancing for months, but I don't know a soul who'd take me."

"I'd like to do something about that," he said. "But it rather depends on what develops around here. Don't give up hope yet, though."

As they entered the hall, Bastion came out of a back room and said: "Ah, good morning, Annie. There are some pages I was revising last night on my desk. I'll be with you in a moment."

She went on into the room he had just come from, and he turned to the Saint.

"I suppose you didn't see anything."

"If we had, you'd've heard plenty of gunfire and hollering."

"Did you leave Eleanor down there?"

"Yes. But I don't think she's in any danger in broad daylight. Did Mackenzie call?"

"Not yet. I expect you're anxious to hear from him. The telephone's in the drawing-room—why don't you settle down there? You might like to browse through some of Eleanor's collection of books about the Monster."

Simon accepted the suggestion, and soon found himself so absorbed that only his empty stomach was conscious of the time when Bastion came in and told him that lunch was ready. Mrs.

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Bastion had already returned and was dishing up an agreeably aromatic lamb stew which she apologized for having only warmed up.

"You were right, it was just routine," she said. "A lot of waiting for nothing. But one of these days it won't be for nothing."

"I was thinking about it myself, dear," Bastion said, "and it seems to me that there's one bad weakness in your eight-hour-a-day system. There are enough odds against you already in only being able to see about a quarter of the loch, which leaves the Monster another three-quarters where it could just as easily pop up. But on top of that, watching only eight hours out of the twenty-four only gives us a one-third chance of being there even if it does pop up within range of our observation post. That doesn't add to the odds against us, it multiplies them."

"I know; but what can we do about it?"

"Since Mr. Templar pointed out that anyone should really be safe enough with a high-powered rifle in their hands and everyone else within call, I thought that three of us could divide up the watches and cover the whole day from before dawn till after dusk, as long as one could possibly see anything. That is, if Mr. Templar would help out. I know he can't stay here indefinitely, but—"

"If it'll make anybody feel better, I'd be glad to take a turn that way," Simon said indifferently.

It might have been more polite to sound more enthusiastic, but he could not make himself believe that the Monster would actually be caught by any such system. He was impatient for Mackenzie's report, which he thought was the essential detail.

The call came about two o'clock, and it was climactically negative.

"The doctor canna find a trrace o' drugs or poison in the puir animal."

Simon took a deep breath.

"What did he think of its injuries?"

"He said he'd ne'er seen the like o' them. He dinna ken anything in the wurruld wi' such crrushin' power in its jaws as yon Monster must have. If 'twas no' for the teeth marrks, he wad ha' thocht it was done wi' a club. But the autopsy mak's that impossible."

"So I take it you figure that rules you officially out," said the Saint bluntly. "But give me a number where I can call you if the picture changes again."

He wrote it down on a pad beside the telephone before he turned and relayed the report.

"That settles it," said Mrs. Bastion. "It can't be anything else but *an Niseag*. And we've got all the more reason to try Noel's idea of keeping watch all day."

"I had a good sleep this morning, so I'll start right away," Bas-

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tion volunteered. "You're entitled to a siesta."

"I'll take over after that," she said. "I want to be out there again at twilight. I know I'm monopolizing the most promising times, but this matters more to me than to anyone else."

Simon helped her with the dishes after they had had coffee, and then she excused herself.

"I'll be fresher later if I do take a little nap. Why don't you do the same? It was awfully good of you to get up in the middle of the night with me."

"It sounds as if I won't be needed again until later tomorrow morning," said the Saint. "But I'll be reading and brooding. I'm almost as interested in *an Niseag* now as you are."

He went back to the book he had left in the drawing-room as the house settled into stillness. Annie Clanraith had already departed, before lunch, taking a sheaf of papers with her to type at home.

Presently he put the volume down on his thighs and lay passively thinking, stretched out on the couch. It was his uniquely personal method of tackling profound problems, to let himself relax into a state of blank receptiveness in which half-subconscious impressions could grow and flow together in delicately fluid adjustments that could presently mould a conclusion almost as concrete as knowledge. For some time he gazed sightlessly at the ceiling, and then he continued to meditate with his eyes closed.

He was awakened by Noel Bastion entering the room, humming tunelessly. The biographer of Wellington was instantly apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Templar—I thought you'd be in your room."

"That's all right." Simon glanced at his watch, and was mildly surprised to discover how sleepy he must have been. "I was doing some thinking, and the strain must have been too much for me."

"Eleanor relieved me an hour ago. I hadn't seen anything, I'm afraid."

"I didn't hear you come in."

"I'm pretty quiet on my feet. Must be a habit I got from commando training. Eleanor often says that if she could stalk like me she'd have a lot more trophies." Bastion went to the bookcase, took down a book, and thumbed through it for some reference. "I've been trying to do some work, but it isn't easy to concentrate."

Simon stood up and stretched himself.

"I guess you'll have to get used to working under difficulties if you're going to be a part-time monster hunter for ten years—isn't that how long Eleanor said she was ready to spend at it?"

"I'm hoping it'll be a good deal less than that."

"I was reading in this book

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*More Than A Legend* that in 1934, when the excitement about the Monster was at its height, a chap named Sir Edward Mountain hired a bunch of men and organized a systematic watch like you were suggesting, but spacing them all around the lake. It went on for a month or two, and they got a few pictures of distant splashings, but nothing that was scientifically accepted."

Bastion put his volume back on the shelf. "You're still skeptical, aren't you?"

"What I've been wondering," said the Saint, "is why this savage behemoth with the big sharp teeth and the nutcracker jaws chomped up a dog but didn't swallow even a little nibble of it."

"Perhaps it isn't carnivorous. An angry elephant will mash a man to a pulp, but it won't eat him. And that dog could be very irritating, barking at everything—"

"According to what I heard, there wasn't any barking. And I'm sure the sheep it's supposed to have taken didn't bark. But the sheep disappeared entirely, didn't it?"

"That's what Clanraith says. But for all we know, the sheep may have been stolen."

"But that could have given somebody the idea of building up the Monster legend from there."

Bastion shook his head.

"But the dog *did* bark at everyone," he insisted stubbornly.

"Except the people he knew," said the Saint, no less persistently. "Every dog is vulnerable to a few people. You yourself, for instance, if you'd wanted to, could have come along, and if he felt lazy he'd've opened one eye and then shut it again and gone back to sleep. Now, are you absolutely sure that nobody else was on those terms with him? Could a postman or a milkman have made friends with him? Or anyone else at all?"

The other man massaged his moustache.

"I don't know. . . . Well, perhaps Fergus Clanraith might."

Simon blinked.

"But it sounded to me as if he didn't exactly love the dog."

"Perhaps he didn't. But it must have known him pretty well. Eleanor likes to go hiking across country, and the dog always used to go with her. She's always crossing Clanraith's property and stopping to talk to him, she tells me. She gets on very well with him."

"What, that old curmudgeon?"

"I know, he's full of that Scottish Nationalist nonsense. But Eleanor is half Scots herself, and that makes her almost human in his estimation. I believe they talk for hours about salmon fishing and grouse shooting."

"I wondered if he had an appealing side hidden away somewhere," said the Saint thoughtfully, "or if Annie got it all from her mother."

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Bastion's deep-set sooty eyes flickered over him appraisingly.

"She's rather an attractive filly, isn't she?"

"I have a feeling that to a certain type of man, in certain circumstances, and perhaps at a certain age, her appeal might be quite dangerous."

Noel Bastion had an odd expression of balancing some answer on the tip of his tongue, weighing it for advisability, changing his mind a couple of times about it, and finally swallowing it. He then tried to recover from the pause by making a business of consulting the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Will you excuse me? Eleanor asked me to bring her a thermos of tea about now. She hates to miss that, even for *an Niseag*."

"Sure."

Simon followed him into the kitchen, where a kettle was already simmering on the black coal stove. He watched while his host carefully scalded a teapot and measured leaves into it from a canister.

"You know, Major," he said, "I'm not a detective by nature, even of the private variety."

"I know. In fact, I think you used to be just the opposite."

"That's true, too, I do get into situations, though, where I have to do a bit of deducing, and sometimes I startle everyone by coming up with a brilliant hunch. But as a general rule, I'd rather prevent a crime than solve one. As it says in your kind of text-books, a little preventive action can save a lot of counter-attacks."

The Major had poured boiling water into the pot with a steady hand, and was opening a vacuum flask while he waited for the brew.

"You're a bit late to prevent this one, aren't you?—if it *was* a crime."

"Not necessarily. Not if the death of Golly was only a stepping-stone—something to build on the story of a missing sheep, and pave the way for the Monster's next victim to be a person. If a person were killed in a similar way now, the Monster explanation would get a lot more believers than if it had just happened out of the blue."

Bastion put sugar and milk into the flask, without measuring, with the unhesitating positiveness of practice, and took the lid off the teapot to sniff and stir it.

"But, good heavens, Templar, who could treat a dog like that, except a sadistic maniac?"

Simon lighted a cigarette. He was very certain now, and the certainty made him very calm.

"A professional killer," he said. "There are quite a lot of them around who don't have police records. People whose temperament and habits have developed a great callousness about death. But they're not sadists. They're normally kind to animals and even to human beings, when it's normally useful to be. But fundamentally

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they see them as expendable, and when the time comes they can sacrifice them quite impersonally."

"I know Clanraith's a farmer, and he raises animals only to have them butchered," Bastion said slowly. "But it's hard to imagine him doing what you're talking about, much as I dislike him."

"Then you think we should discard him as a red herring?"

Bastion filled the thermos from the teapot, and capped it.

"I'm hanged if I know. I'd want to think some more about it. But first I've got to take this to Eleanor."

"I'll go with you," said the Saint.

He followed the other out of the back door. Outside, the dusk was deepening with a mistiness that was beginning to do more than the failing light to reduce visibility. From the garden, one could see into the orchard but not beyond it.

"It's equally hard for the ordinary man," Simon continued relentlessly, "to imagine anyone who's lived with another person as man and wife, making love and sharing the closest moments, suddenly turning around and killing the other one. But the prison cemeteries are full of 'em. And there are plenty more on the outside who didn't get caught—or who are still planning it. At least half the time, the marriage has been getting a bit dull, and someone more attractive has come along. And then, for some idiotic reason, often connected with money, murder begins to seem cleverer than divorce."

Bastion slackened his steps, half turning to peer at Simon from under heavily contracted brows, then spoke slowly.

"I'm not utterly dense, Templar, and I don't like what you seem to be hinting at."

"I don't expect you to, chum. But I'm trying to stop a murder. Let me make a confession. When you and Eleanor have been out or in bed at various times, I've done quite a lot of prying. Which may be a breach of hospitality, but it's less trouble than search warrants. You remember those scratches in the ground near the dead dog which I said could've been made with something that wasn't claws? Well, I found a gaff among somebody's fishing tackle that could've made them, and the point had fresh shiny scratches and even some mud smeared on it which can be analyzed. I haven't been in the attic and found an embalmed shark's head with several teeth missing, but I'll bet Mackenzie could find one. And I haven't yet found the club with the teeth set in it, because I haven't yet been allowed down by the lake alone; but I think it's there somewhere, probably stuffed under a bush, and just waiting to be hauled out when the right head is turned the wrong way."

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Major Bastion had come to a complete halt by that time.

"You unmitigated bounder," he said shakily. "Are you going to have the impertinence to suggest that I'm trying to murder my wife, to come into her money and run off with a farmer's daughter? Let me tell you that I'm the one who has the private income, and—"

"You poor feeble egotist," Simon retorted harshly. "I didn't suspect that for one second after she made herself rather cutely available to me, a guest in your house. She obviously wasn't stupid, and no girl who wasn't would have gambled a solid understanding with you against a transient flirtation. But didn't you ever read *Lady Chatterly's Lover?* Or the Kinsey Report? And hasn't it dawned on you that a forceful woman like Eleanor, just because she isn't a glamour girl, couldn't be bored to frenzy with a husband who only cares about the campaigns of Wellington?"

Noel Bastion opened his mouth, and his fists clenched, but whatever was intended to come from either never materialized. For at that moment came the scream.

Shrill with unearthly terror and agony, it split the darkening haze with an eldritch intensity that seemed to turn every hair on the Saint's nape into an individual icicle. And it did not stop, but ululated again and again in weird cadences of hysteria.

For an immeasurable span they were both petrified; and then Bastion turned and began to run wildly across the meadow, towards the sound.

"*Eleanor!*" he yelled, insanely, in a voice almost as piercing as the screams.

He ran so frantically that the Saint had to call on all his reserves to make up for Bastion's split-second start. But he did close the gap as Bastion stumbled and almost fell over something that lay squarely across their path. Simon had seen it an instant sooner, and swerved, mechanically identifying the steely glint that had caught his eye as a reflection from a long gun-barrel.

And then, looking ahead and upwards, he saw through the blue fogginess something for which he would never completely believe his eyes, yet which would haunt him for the rest of his life. Something grey-black and scaly-slimy, an immense amorphous mass from which a reptilian neck and head with strange protuberances reared and swayed far up over him. And in the hideous dripping jaws something of human shape, from which the screams came, that writhed and flailed ineffectually with a peculiar-looking club. . . .

With a sort of incoherent sob, Bastion scooped up the rifle at his feet and fired it. The horrendous mass convulsed; and into Simon's

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eardrums, still buzzing from the heavy blast, came a sickening crunch that cut off the last shriek in the middle of a note.

The towering neck corkscrewed with frightful power, and the thing that had been human was flung dreadfully towards them. It fell with a kind of soggy limpness almost at their feet, as whatever had spat it out lurched backwards and was blotted out by the vaporous dimness with the sound of a gigantic splash while Bastion was still firing again at the place where it had been. . . .

As Bastion finally dropped the gun and sank slowly to his knees beside the body of his wife, Simon also looked down and saw that her hand was still spasmodically locked around the thinner end of the crude bludgeon in which had been set a row of shark's teeth. Now that he saw it better, he saw that it was no home-made affair, but probably a souvenir of some expedition to the South Pacific. But you couldn't be right all the time, about every last detail. Just as a few seconds ago, and until he saw Bastion with his head bowed like that over the woman who had plotted to murder him, he had never expected to be restrained in his comment by the irrational compassion that finally moved him.

"By God," he thought, "now I know I'm ageing."

But aloud he said: "She worked awful hard to sell everyone on the Monster. If you like, we can leave it that way. Luckily I'm a witness to what happened just now. But I don't have to say anything about—this."

He released the club gently from the grip of the dead fingers, and carried it away with him as he went to telephone Mackenzie.

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*Richard H. Blum has published mostly non-fiction, including* THE FAMILY GUIDE TO DOCTORS, HOSPITALS AND MEDICAL CARE, *Macmillan, 1964 and* UTOPIATES: A STUDY OF THE USE AND USERS OF LSD-25, *Atherton, 1964. Dr. Blum is a Doctor of Psychology and is a consultant at The Institute for the Study of Human Problems at Stanford University (which would seem to be one institute with enough business to keep even consultants working overtime). Dr. Blum has not strayed far (if at all) from his field in this chilling and realistic account of a couple disillusioned with their marriage and terrified of their child.*

# THE FIRMIN CHILD

## by Richard H. Blum

ELIZABETH FIRMIN WAS AN ORdinary woman. Her husband was an ordinary man. They lived in a modern apartment in Menlo Park, which is certainly an ordinary town. But their child Tommy was extraordinary.

Elliot Firmin had been a graduate student at Berkeley when he met Elizabeth. She worked in the administrative offices of the University. She was a pretty girl; blonde, snub-nosed, happily impertinent lips, grey eyes, and a well-molded body which, not without vanity, she clothed in the latest fashions. She had found Elliot appealing. He was lean, dark-haired, sharp-featured, with shoulders that sloped impatiently forward, giving him an angular stance, as if he were holding himself ready for a sudden start, like a runner in a game. His movements were quick and nervous, enhancing the impression of latent forces tightly reigned. He was funny and sarcastic and he startled Elizabeth. She, finding secretarial work dull, liked that.

When they were married they moved into a student apartment which was small, dirty, and Bohemian. Travel posters and penny poetry were thumbtacked to the plywood walls, and half-empty wine bottles stood atmospheric vigil on orange crate tables in the brief intervals between parties. There were a few books lying on



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the brick-and-board bookcase shelves, but there were not enough of them to lend seriousness to the pretension of scholarship. Elliot himself soon abandoned even the pretensions and shifted his field from chemistry to education.

Tommy was born seven months after their wedding, a premature baby only in the social sense. His development had been normal enough, so it seemed, until the day Elliot had installed the hi-fi set. Elliot was an enthusiast. Stereophonic locomotives roared through the room, stereophonic oceans raged at their door, stereophonic jungle animals rambled across their ear drums—and Elliot loved them all. But Tommy did not. From the moment it began to play he began to kick and scream and it was at this point that his long war with the stereo set began. His parents thought it was because he had an aversion to music.

Tommy was two when Elliot finished school and got his first job, as a teacher, in Menlo Park. There they lived in an apartment and there, whenever the music played, Tommy ragingly pounded the sound system's heavy doors with his fists. He was unable to affect the set, but eventually he affected his father. Elliot, annoyed, would tune the set louder, ostensibly to hear the music over the roar of his son, but in fact to show just who was boss in the family. The issue was never settled clearly.

During his third year Tommy began to have what Elizabeth called, "quiet tantrums." They occurred without any apparent reasons. Odd movements they were, contortions, writhing, as though his muscles had some spontaneous sensuous rhythm of their own, all of them at once. Elizabeth tried scolding, massage and, finally, a new mattress, but the movements went on.

Elliot received a raise and they moved to a new and larger apartment, a six-family California two-story place with a lawn, common utility room and an enclosed play area out back. The other families had toddlers too and, in the manner of suburbanites, Elliot and Elizabeth met the other people there through the children. It wasn't long before they were part of a lively social circle. In the mornings Elizabeth joined the other mothers in the patio or play area to drink coffee, chat, and watch the children play. Occasionally the girls, as they thought of themselves, had morning martinis. Evenings and weekends all of the adults shared cocktails and barbecues and Elizabeth loved it. But she wasn't sure about Tommy.

He began the business with the spoon about the time of his fourth birthday. At first it was just a matter of his insisting that he be allowed to carry the spoon, a bat-

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tered tablespoon he had apparently found somewhere, wherever he went. He kept it carefully in his jumper pocket, treating it with more affection than any puppet or shaggy stuffed animal. Clearly it was *his* spoon and he treasured it.

But soon he began to polish it, daily at first and hourly later. Usually he used his pants cuff or shirt sleeve, gently rubbing to and fro, holding the spoon this way and that in the light, watching it carefully, breathing excitedly as he did so. At first Elizabeth thought he was mimicking her, for often he watched her fight her weekly kitchen battle with the tarnished silver, but soon she realized it must be something else. He was too intense about it and it made her uneasy.

The three of them were sitting in the living room one evening, jazz playing loudly, and Tommy huddled in scowling defense in the farthest corner of the room. By now he had abandoned his physical attacks on the record player, now he just stared at it. But this evening he did something more. They watched him as he hauled himself from the floor, tumbling some surrealistic structure he'd made with his plastic blocks as he arose, and pulled that spoon from his pocket. He turned it over repeatedly in his hand, the solemn gravity of the very young bearing his movement company. Slowly he bent toward the loudspeaker, but averting his eyes sideways, focused on the spoon. He moved it in little circles, in long straight lines. Next came spirals and figure eights, all sculpted in the air. These latter he repeated and his head began, an automatism, to nod rhythmically with his baton.

Elliot smiled, "Well, what do you know? We've got a bandleader in the family."

Elizabeth was immensely relieved, "Of course, *that's* what it is!"

"What else?" asked Elliot.

"I'd wondered, that's all," she replied.

He ignored her. "What do you think, Tom Toms," he smiled over his new-coined diminutive, "You want to be a drummer or are you a *horn man*?"

Tommy paid no attention. His grey eyes followed the slow geometry of his wand. His mouth was open. His tongue moved restlessly, rhythmically, back and forth over his lower lip. His tousled silky light brown hair had fallen over his forehead and his eyebrows, already bushier, broader and darker than ordinarily seen in children of his age, seemed to curl downwards at their ends, as if they were willing themselves to frown.

It was a few weeks later that they were sitting in the living room after dinner. Elliot was correcting papers, Elizabeth was

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sewing, and Tommy was sitting on the floor pushing some toy cars about. It was quiet except for those muffled sounds which creep through apartment houses in the evening. Tommy stopped playing to stare at the floor. He got to his knees, pulling his spoon from his pocket. With great care he polished it, using his blue corduroy trousers as a cloth. Still kneeling, he cocked his head sideways, averted his eyes again, and began to wave his spoon slowly about, sweeping it in twisting motions. His wrist seemed like rubber.

A chill coursed through Elizabeth. Tommy was "conducting" when there was no music. Elliot, sensing her shiver, turned.

"Tommy, what are you doing that for?" he asked.

Tommy didn't seem to hear.

"Tommy! What *are* you doing?"

The boy made no reply.

Except for the business with the spoon there was nothing else tangible which his mother could point to to account for her growing uneasiness. Tommy played with his friends, he ate well, slept well, and seemed capable of entertaining himself. Comparing him to other four-year-olds Elizabeth felt differences which were difficult to pinpoint. There was no question that Tommy was brighter than others, his vocabulary exceeded that of the six-year-old Watkins child downstairs, but it wasn't that kind of idiosyncrasy that troubled her. For one thing he had begun to have long periods of silence, which unlike the moods of other children, seemed to have nothing to do with his being angry or tired or feeling hurt.

Elizabeth found his silences, preoccupations if they were that, hard to understand. She herself was an extroverted person who rarely gave in to moods. Conversation was her joy; she had never understood the silent people. Elliot would, Elizabeth thought. Most dark-haired people did tend to introversion, but even he liked to be sociable. Where could Tommy have picked it up? Maybe Tommy *had* inherited his temperament from Elliot. It was alien to her; alien and repugnant, and now a little frightening.

As the months passed and Tommy grew taller, he began to grow thinner too, looking less and less, Elizabeth thought, like her. There was more of Elliot showing in his face now; a development which she didn't welcome, although she wasn't too surprised. Elliot himself had not been growing any better-looking the last year or two, nor was he endearing himself particularly to his wife.

She had come, by now, to view her husband as a little tedious, a little too "practical," and quite unamusing. It had been a long time since he had surprised her, and his old energies seemed to have dissipated, leaving him fat-

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ter and too content. She was tired of the apartment house too and had suggested to her husband that a change of scene would do them no harm. But he had argued, a conservative at age twenty-nine, that change had little to recommend. He was comfortable where he was.

She was reluctant to bring up her views on Tommy. That was already a sore subject. Nevertheless there were occasions on which she gathered her courage to confront her husband with her most profound concern; that there was something odd about Tommy. Her husband's usual response was to ridicule her and pompously to advise her to encourage the growth of "uniqueness" in their child. At such times she was overcome with bitterness, for she felt she knew something of Tommy's sinister "uniqueness," and she could well do without it.

Her case was a difficult one to present. Tommy looked well. He never fought with the other children and when attacked, retreated into an impermeable silence. The other mothers praised him and rightly claimed he was good-looking and had a charming smile. So he might, but it had been some time since his mother had seen him smile at her. Once inside the house he was moody and impenetrable, absorbed in what appeared to her to be nonsensical black magic with his spoon, or twisting into those body-warping rhythmical acrobatics that reminded her of an animal in its death throes. Desperately she had tried to break him of these habits, but she had failed. Now when he began she turned away.

But she couldn't turn away from him all the time, nor did she want to. Sometimes he was adorable, at other times sad and helpless, and sometimes bright and cheery. These were times for play and love and lullabies. But then there was always the other Tommy, the fey child, the stranger, the witch. She saw that side more often now. It made her nervous to be with him.

Elizabeth and Tommy were having lunch together one Wednesday; peanut butter sandwich, apple, and milk.

"Mommy?"

"Yes?"

"Why do the Watkins hate each other?"

Elizabeth was shocked. The Watkins, their neighbors downstairs these several years, were a pleasant couple, friendly, and apparently happily married. Their son, nearly Tommy's age, was his play companion.

"Where in heaven's name did you ever get an idea like that, Tommy?"

He shrugged his shoulders and took another bite of his sandwich.

"Why?" he repeated.

One day Elizabeth was sitting

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out back in the play area with Eleanor Watkins and Sally Neubruck while their children scrambled about on the slides and in the sandbox. Tommy was pushing a toy tractor in the sand; he had given up using his precious spoon as a toy and kept it safely tucked away in his jumper pocket. Something had gone wrong with his tractor, sand had jammed the moving parts of the blade in front. He brought it over to Elizabeth.

"Mommy, can you fix this?"

She had taken it from him and using her hairpin, managed to put it in order again.

Eleanor Watkins smiled at Tommy, saying, "There Tommy, your mother is a good mechanic, isn't she?"

Tommy nodded, but instead of going back to the sand pile, he stood looking quizzically into Mrs. Watkins' face.

"What is it, Tommy?" she asked.

"What's a divorce?" he asked.

Eleanor Watkins blushed deeply, turning to Elizabeth with a look of fury over Tommy's question.

"Did you tell him?" Eleanor asked Elizabeth bitterly.

"No, certainly not," said Elizabeth, shocked by Tommy's question and by her friend's angry accusation. She faced Tommy.

"Where in the world did you ever find such a question?"

Tommy looked up at his mother, a look of deep hurt passing over his face. Without answering, he turned his back and shuffled despondently back to the sand pile.

"I told you it was in confidence!" Eleanor Watkins was near tears.

"But I tell you, Elly, I didn't mention a word," cried Elizabeth, "not a soul."

"I'll bet!" Eleanor Watkins stalked angrily away, pulling her children along after her.

"What's that all about?" asked Sally Neubruck, who had been sitting quietly as an amazed bystander.

Elizabeth was near to tears. "It can't hurt to tell you now, not after that. Eleanor has been thinking of getting a divorce. She's not getting along with Fred at all. I guess they're having some awful scenes. It was a surprise to me, but she just told me about it and asked me not to tell a soul. I feel so embarrassed I could cry. I didn't tell anybody, not even Elliot. I just don't know why Tommy had to ask her *that* question. She had no right to jump to conclusions. Tommy probably didn't know a thing. It was just a coincidence, that's all."

"I'm sure it was," agreed Sally Neubruck. "It had to be."

In the kitchen the next morning Elizabeth ruminated over the events of the previous evening. She

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prided herself on being a reasonable woman, but this time she mused, she had been driven too far. Tommy had embarrassed her in front of Eleanor Watkins, embarrassed her sick he had, with that animal cunning of his, and then he'd gone into that unnerving spasm with the spoon which was enough to drive anyone insane. Then there was Elliot, a clod, a stupid blind fool. She'd told him so last night.

Elliot came home early, resolved to have it out with Elizabeth. Her behavior with Tommy had been intolerable. She was all love one minute and all fury the next. And she was so nervous; what a change from the easygoing vivacious girl he had married. Elliot didn't like to think about it, but the marriage was going downhill.

Elliot was convinced that Tommy was at the root of the trouble. Tommy was such a sweet boy, why couldn't Elizabeth enjoy him? Oh, he could agree that Tom Toms was a little moody once in a while, but that was no reason for *her* to get upset. As for the spoon business, well, it might be a little funny, but why fuss? He'd outgrow it. Elliot believed in permissiveness; let children grow up without carping at them all the time. He was sure Tommy would turn out all right. He needed time, that was all.

No one was home when he arrived at 4:15. He presumed they were probably still out shopping. Elliot looked around the kitchen for something to eat. He was munching a cold leg of chicken when he heard the footsteps on the balcony by the front door. There was a light knock simultaneous with the door being pushed open.

"Hello there, Elizabeth?" It was Eleanor Watkins. She walked into the living room calling again, "Elizabeth?"

"Nobody in here but us chickens," Elliot called back.

"Oh, Elliot, is that you?"

"Nobody else."

Eleanor Watkins walked into the kitchen. She was a pretty girl, petite, dark brown hair, bright brown eyes, a sultry—almost pouting—mouth. Elliot's eyes followed her into the room. She wore a tight sweater and a full flaring skirt. He liked what he saw.

"Oh, but you're home so early." Eleanor smiled, pleased and surprised. She liked Elliot.

"A little I guess. For once this month there wasn't any extracurricular nonsense at school to supervise."

"Oh." Her hand began to stroke her hair. Eleanor stood there smiling, at home, her lips slightly apart.

"Anything I can do for you?" asked Elliot cheerfully, "Cup of sugar, eggs, flour, rattlesnake meat? We aim to please."

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"Oh Elliot, you *are* a tease. No, I just came up because I needed someone to talk to . . ." Her smile disappeared and in its place there came a look of sadness. She lowered her lashes and bit, with even white teeth, into the softness of her lower lip.

"Something wrong?" asked Elliot frowning.

"Nothing, nothing really." She seemed near to tears.

"Gosh Eleanor, what is it?"

"Oh Elliot, it's simply awful, awful." She had begun to cry.

"What's wrong?" Elliot felt awkward and incompetent.

"It's Fred. He's been beastly to me, just beastly, I can't tell you how awful he's been. He hates me, he said so, and he's just awful." The tears were coursing down her cheek, red framed her eyes.

"Well, gosh, well, I'm certainly sorry to hear that."

Elliot had begun to perspire. He blushed a little. He had no idea what to say. Poor Eleanor. She'd always been so cheerful; friendly too. Elliot wondered what to make of it all. Fred Watkins seemed to be a decent enough fellow. Elliot had known him for —was it four or five years now? He'd never suspected Fred of being ornery. Imagine. Elliot had thought the two of them had gotten along fine. Embarrassed, Elliot repeated himself.

"Well, yes, I am sorry to hear that."

The tears sprang from her eyes. She wailed,

"Fred and I are going to get a divorce!"

Before Elliot could comment, Eleanor Watkins had hurled herself against his chest, her arms clinging around his waist, her soft hair nestled against his cheek. She held him as she shuddered, crying.

Elliot was dumbfounded, embarrassed, flattered, pleased. He felt a swell of tenderness arising within him. His conscience told him not to, but nevertheless his own arm went around her, his hand stroked her head. He murmured,

"There, there, Elly, don't you worry. It'll be all right."

She held him tight. He held her.

She raised her tear-wet face expectantly.

"Oh Elliot, I'm so unhappy."

Elliot's heart was pouding. He was hot and dry and churning, as he kissed her.

They were still in the kitchen, embracing, when Elliot heard the sound that he feared; footsteps coming up the outside steps. He recognized them as Elizabeth's and Tommy's. Abruptly he pulled himself from Eleanor's embrace, saying,

"We mustn't be seen Elly, we can't, no, no!"

He fled, consumed with panic, guilt, residual excitement; he fled to the bathroom, to lock the door,

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to secure himself from discovery, to gain time. Once inside he breathed more easily, checking his shirt and face in the mirror for telltale signs of powder or lipstick. Over the ripple of the running faucet he heard the front door close and the voices of the two women greeting each other in the kitchen. Elliot took his time.

"Hi, Daddy," Tommy greeted Elliot cheerfully as he sauntered into the kitchen.

"Hi, Family," he replied.

Elizabeth was unloading groceries on the sideboard. Her greeting was cordial and totally unsuspicious.

Eleanor said nothing, only smiling. Her eyes were red-rimmed but she appeared, to Elliot's astonished eye, completely composed. He looked at her only once, quickly averting his eyes. It was Eleanor who spoke next.

"Oh Elizabeth, I hate to bother you, but I just stepped in to beg a couple of eggs. I guess Elliott was in the bathroom. Anyway, I didn't want to take them without asking. May I?"

As Eleanor departed Elliot smiled a secret goodbye.

At dinnertime Tommy was in a good mood. He chattered about his toys, asked about going to the park the next day, expressed his solicitude over the fact that Floppy, his monkey hand puppet, was about to lose an ear, and effervesced over toasted almond ice cream with chocolate sauce *and* whipped cream. Watching him affectionately, Elliot wondered what in the world could have made Elizabeth think there was anything wrong with a tiptop Tommy like his.

"Daddy?"

"What is it, Tommy?" Elliot was in an exceptionally good mood, yes, exceptionally good.

"When can we go to the beach?"

"Why, as soon as it gets warmer, Tom Toms, maybe in a couple of weeks."

"Can I take Floppy to the beach?"

"Sure, you can take Floppy."

"Will Mrs. Watkins come along with us to the beach too?"

"Mrs. Watkins?" Elizabeth was puzzled. "Why in heaven's name would you think of that, Tommy?"

"Because she's sad, like Floppy. She'd like the beach."

"Why that's very nice of you to think of her Tommy, but what makes you *think* Mrs. Watkins is so sad?" said Elizabeth.

"Yes, she is, she is! I know she is." He turned to his father, a serious look on his face.

"Isn't Mrs. Watkins sad, Daddy?"

Elliot, infused with a guilty conscience, turned scarlet.

"Isn't she, Daddy?" Tommy insisted.

"Why yes, Tommy, I suppose she is."

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Elizabeth had no idea why Elliot seemed so uncomfortable. Perhaps, she thought, he was reluctant to talk about the private problems of adults, perhaps too he had recognized the arrow of Tommy's perturbing clairvoyance. She was pleased. She hoped Tommy would ask his father more of those intrusive and disconcerting questions. Someday maybe Elliot would begin to get an idea of what she was talking about.

Elliot was seething with anxiety, doom seemed just around the corner. What would Tommy ask next? The wily little . . . Elliot fought to suppress the curse. It would be a miracle, Elliot thought, if he could slip out of this situation without Elizabeth noticing, without Tommy trapping him. Elliot fought to control himself, to outwit his son. There, damn him, Tommy was taking aim again.

"Daddy, why does Mrs. Watkins . . ."

Elliot interrupted. He wasn't going to let Tommy have his say.

"We'll not talk about Mrs. Watkins. Her life isn't our business. You've got to learn that; not to stick your nose into other people's affairs. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Daddy." Tommy's eyes were troubled.

Elizabeth had been in bed with the flu for four days. Sally Neubruck had taken care of Tommy most of the time, while Elliot, more considerate and affectionate these days than he had been in years, prepared the meals. The apartment had gone to pot. Elizabeth, who was still sick but who had insisted on getting up to eat with the family at dinnertime, surveyed the wreckage. Elliot was certainly no dishwasher. The yellow lineoleum-tiled floor was turning beige from the dirt.

"I'll never be able to clean this mess up," she complained plaintively.

"It's a little disorganized, I'll admit," replied Elliot.

"Disorganized! It's simply hopeless. Oh, I wish I'd never gotten sick! What ever will I do?"

"Why don't you get a cleaning woman in to help you? I think we could afford it."

"Oh Elliot, could we really?"

"Sure. What does it cost?"

"It's expensive," she warned.

"Like?"

"About $1.50 an hour I'm afraid."

Elliot pulled a pencil from his pocket and scratched some figures on the pink paper napkin.

"Let's say you have her in for five hours a day for the next six days. Would that do the trick?"

"It would be a Godsend!"

"Good. Tell you what, I'll go down to the bank tomorrow and get the money out of savings. You call the employment office and have them send somebody out. Okay?"

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"Grand." She smiled weakly.

The cleaning woman, a thin tired-looking colored lady of about sixty, dressed in an old faded blue print dress and wearing shoes with run-down heels, peered at Tommy. She wore thick old-fashioned spectacles that testified to her short sight.

"Boy?"

"Yes?"

"You run in now and tell your mother I'm all ready to go now."

Obediently Tommy shuffled into the bedroom. Elizabeth was dressed in her pink terry-cloth robe. She was sitting in the lounging chair reading the morning paper, even though it was by now afternoon. For the last few minutes her eyes had been fixed on an advertisement. There was a clearance sale of imported Italian purses; black calfskin, lined in gold-colored satin, very fashionable. Reduced from $21.00 to $10.95.

Elizabeth wanted one of those purses. She'd needed a purse for longer than she cared to remember. They never seemed to have any money for what *she* wanted, only for what Elliot wanted. It wasn't fair. More debts and tighter budgeting, that's what each year seemed to bring. She was still wearing the things she'd bought when she was single, years ago. Elliot was a real pennypincher, salting it away in the bank. Why the cleaning woman had more money in her purse than she did. Yes, it was true, Elizabeth affirmed to herself, the cleaning woman *was* better off. One dollar and fifty cents an hour. It was robbery. What had the woman done these last six days? Waved a mop at the dust and run some hot water over the dishes. It was dishonest.

When Tommy came in with the message, Elizabeth pulled the wallet out of her purse. There was the money inside, three ten dollar bills and three fives, just as Elliot had given her. How self-satisfied he'd been with his generosity, like a millionaire giving dimes to the poor. And there, in her side of the wallet, a measly five dollars.

As she held the wallet in her hand, Elizabeth had an idea. It was a new kind of an idea and she liked it. She liked it very much.

"Tommy," she said, "you go outside and play now. See if some of your friends are home."

Tommy walked obediently to the front door. She listened carefully as his steps ran down the outside stairway and faded away into silence as he reached the patio below. She waited another moment. She needed time to gather her resolve.

The old woman, her face soured by too many of the wrong kind of years, said only:

"I'm done, Ma'am. That's forty-five dollars."

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"Yes," said Elizabeth, "Here."

Quickly she counted out the money; "Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, forty-five. There you are." She thrust the bills into the other's hand.

The cleaning woman peered nearsightedly at the money. As she did so Elizabeth could feel her own heart pounding rapidly inside. Her mouth was dry and sticky, as if someone had glued the membranes to one another.

The woman thanked Elizabeth and shuffled out the front door, the bills wadded tightly in her claw-like old hand. As soon as the front door closed Elizabeth plummeted into a chair, her shaking legs no longer able to support her. She was breathing heavily. It wasn't easy to do what she had done, still, it had gone well. She opened her palm to look at the two ten dollar bills flat inside, moist now from her perspiration.

When she heard the knock on the door her stomach twisted inside her and the skin of her body turned dry and prickly. She summoned her strength to answer the door knock. It was, as she had known, the cleaning woman. The woman stood there blinking uncertainly. Her old face was more puckered than ever. What an evil face, thought Elizabeth, evil and corrupt.

"I counted that money you give me. They wasn't two tens you give me, they wuz two fives."

"I don't understand," said Elizabeth sweetly.

"You only give me $35, not $45, just then." The old woman's voice rasped and whined.

"But that's impossible. You were there when I counted it out."

"I don't care who wuz there, honey, but you give me fives instead of tens. I want my $10."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you're mistaken. I've given you your money."

"I don't make mistakes about money, honey. You give me my pay!"

The old woman's yellow teeth, black at the gums, glistened in the afternoon light, wet and dirty like a rodent's. Elizabeth felt a little ill. A fetid mouth. Evil.

"You've been paid," said Elizabeth firmly.

"You cheated me. That's what you done. I'm gonna call the police."

"Please do. On the other hand I don't think you want to get into trouble." Elizabeth's eyes were narrow. She felt suddenly very self-possessed, as if she were made of steel. She continued:

"It's your word against mine. I think I know whom the police will believe, don't you?"

The old woman's eyes gleamed, small and full of hatred. Elizabeth went on, speaking calmly:

"Besides, I think there's some silver missing in the buffet."

The old woman blinked rapidly. Her breath came in short gasps,

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wheezing, like a squeaky bellows. Her mouth moved but no sound came. There was a silence of a full minute while the two women measured each other and themselves. The old Negro's shoulders sagged. Bitterly she said,

"Thank you, honey. You must need that money real bad. I won't forget you, no, I won't."

Elizabeth stood on the balcony and watched as the old woman walked slowly out of sight. Elizabeth was surprised to find herself smiling.

Tommy came in for cookies and milk at four. He was moody, munching the supermarket's newest brand of marshmallow puffs without a word. Just looking at him made Elizabeth uncomfortable, the way his eyes seemed to follow her, the way he seemed to *know* something.

"Well, Tommy, is there something you want to say?" she challenged him menacingly.

Tommy shook his head. His fingers, buried in his pocket, caressed his spoon.

It was a Sunday afternoon. The weather was sunny but a crisp wind blew in from the Pacific. The rock-framed beach south of Pescadero was empty, save for the gulls and the long cables of bulbous seaweed which were coiled across the sand. Tommy had run down the narrow twisting path from the tiny parking area to the beach itself. He was exuberant. As he ran, his hands moved rhythmically, snaking in hesitant circles through the air; a spastic Balinese dance. For the last few months any excitement had produced these bizarre wooden gyrations. Now he kicked off his rubber Japanese sandals and rushed up to the water's edge, there to play tag with the foaming, darting waves. Occasionally he stopped to check his coat pocket where Floppy the monkey had been put to ride, head forward, like a baby kangaroo in a pouch.

His parents walked some fifty or sixty feet behind him. They were talking, their heads close together, each straining to hear the other's voice above the roar of the sea.

"Look at him go," said Elliot. "Why he runs like a sandpiper."

"He loves it," agreed Elizabeth.

"It's good for him to get out."

"Yes," agreed Elizabeth. "It is good for him. Maybe that will help . . ." her voice trailed off, tentative.

"Yes," said Elliot, "Maybe it will."

Elizabeth looked curiously into the face of her husband, "You see it too, then?"

"Yes," said Elliot quietly.

Elizabeth experienced a wave of relief. After all these years of blindness, of lying, of angry denial, Elliot had at last opened himself to the truth. She was no longer alone. She and Elliot were

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together again, bearing a burden together.

She reached out her hand to grasp his. He responded, holding hers firmly. It had been a long time since they had walked hand-in-hand like that. As far as Elizabeth was concerned it was a rebirth. Elliot, too, was glad that he had stopped lying to himself and to her. He would face the facts head on.

"He's a strange child," mused Elliot.

"Yes."

"He's getting worse."

"Yes."

"The spoon, the dances, the silences, the spells. It's not human. He's like a devil sometimes, or an animal."

"But he's so sweet sometimes, so intelligent."

"Too intelligent." Elliot was emphatic.

"Yes, that's true." She spoke bitterly, then asked,

"Do you have any idea, Elliot, I mean why it had to happen to us? What have we done wrong? Why did we deserve it?"

Elliot shook his head. She went on,

"What is it or what is he that makes him this way? What's wrong?"

"I don't know really. Maybe he's sick; sick in the head, nutty. It's hard to believe. I've never heard of any sickness like his. But if it's not sickness, well, maybe it's something even worse, something diabolical I don't know."

"It scares me, Elliot. It really does."

Ahead of them Tommy was seated on the sand waiting for them. As they drew near he pulled his precious spoon out of his pocket, gently dispossessing Floppy as he did so. Gripping the spoon in his left hand he gestured like a divine in a benediction. His ritual had begun.

It was the first time that Tommy had ever pointed a spoon at either one of them. They didn't understand his intentions, but they understood evil. They stood transfixed as the spoon swung through the air, an eerie aura, ominously portending.

Elizabeth's spine chilled, frosty tingling fingers raced out her limbs.

"Tommy!" she shouted. "Stop it! Elliot, make him stop!"

Elliot strode up to his son and grabbed him by the shoulders. He shook the boy so hard that the child's teeth rattled.

"There, that ought to shake some sense into you."

There was a fool's grin on Tommy's face. He began to laugh, but not like a child. It was the cry of a whooping crane hooting from the treetops in the whispering quiet of the seashore's night. That laughter consumed him until he fell back dazed on the sand.

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Horror-stricken, spellbound, his parents could only watch.

When he had recovered wit and strength, Tommy, his face bland and expressionless, asked:

"We're all frightened, aren't we?"

His parents didn't answer.

"We'll go away now, won't we? We'll make it go away."

"Do you want to go home, Tommy? Is that what you mean?" his mother asked.

Tommy clutched the spoon so tightly in his small hand that the knuckles grew white. He aimed the spoon at his parents.

"I'm going to make it go away, Daddy. I'm going to make the ocean drown the noises down. The noises go way in the water. I wave the waves, wave the sounds. Good-waving soundbyes. The fish will drown. Go down. Round with the sound. Down to drown."

"Oh Tommy, please!" His mother was pleading, fighting back the terror and the tears. "Please don't talk like that. Listen to me Tommy, I'm your mother. Please. Tell me what's wrong."

He looked at her, cocking his head to one side attentively, like a dog hearing distant sounds.

"The ocean is wrong, Mommy, the waves are too noisy. It's too deep and nobody can swim. The fish don't play anymore, but I'll wave them away. Then Floppy can play and it won't scare me like the devil sometimes or an animal."

"Tommy, what are you saying?" Elliot was aghast.

"Too intelligent Elizabeth, sick in the head or something worse. Something dies. And Floppy with his ears coming off."

"My God!" Elizabeth's hand covered her mouth, her face was snow pale.

"He heard us. The kid heard us." Elliot was appalled. "He heard what we said. He must have heard what we said way back there behind him on the beach. He heard us. No. He couldn't have!"

Elizabeth's eyes were closed as she said, "Yes Elliot, he's been hearing us all along. Hearing everybody. I've been wrong. He wasn't reading my mind. He's been *listening.*"

"It's not right!" Elliot shouted angrily. "He didn't tell us. We didn't know. He'd have to have ears like a dog, like a bat, an animal. No, that's not it. It can't be. It's the other . . ." Elliot's voice had dropped low, as one first discovering the grand conspiracy; triumphant, understanding, but half-insane. He faced his son,

"Well Tommy, is that it? You can tell us now. We know."

"I love you, Elly. Elizabeth must never know. Oh Elliot I love you. Is that the way I love Elizabeth, Daddy?" Tommy's voice was bland but his face was excited, his eyes overbright. He clenched and unclenched his fist about the spoon.

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Elliot began to move toward his son slowly. The muscles in Elliot's cheek twitched. Tommy watched him carefully, like a cat gauging the approach of an antagonist. He raised the spoon and pointed it toward his father, saying:

"You cheated me that's what you done. I'm gonna call the police. They'll take Floppy and he'll kill everybody. He'll kill the ocean. Thank you, honey. I won't forget you, you must need that money, no I won't."

Elliot stood still. Elizabeth stared at her son. The sound of sea surf encompassed all of them; the salt wind burying them with whispers, the ocean roaring oblivion at them.

And her child smiled back. He laughed sweetly, a choir boy, an angel, and then, doubling into twisted deformity, began to roll in the sand, flailing it with his hands. He was screaming; flecks of froth flying, tiny flakes, being blown with the sea foam coming from the sea, his cries merging with the circling gulls, his laughter with the roar of the sea.

The climb up from the beach on the winding path had been exhausting. Both of them were pale and panting. Blood oozed from Elizabeth's knee. She had fallen while running up the steep trail.

"Oh, dear God!" she moaned, "Oh Elliot. It was awful!" She was hysterical.

"Yea."

"Oh, dear God!"

"Try to calm yourself, darling. Maybe in the long run it will work out for the best this way. It wasn't, it wasn't natural to expect it to go on. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away!"

"But Elliot, it wasn't God that did . . ." For a moment she stopped, giving her shocked mind time to search for an acceptable phrase . . . "that did—what happened just now."

Elliot admired her delicate choice of words.

"No darling, it wasn't God, but no one else will ever know that will they, dear?" He put his hand over hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. They reached the car and got inside.

Her cries were only whimpers now. As she fought for composure she replied:

"No dear."

She held tightly to his hand as they sped away from the empty beach, hurrying to the nearest telephone.

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SCIENCE

# WATER, WATER, EVERYWHERE–

**by Isaac Asimov**

THE ONE TIME IN MY ADULT life that I indulged in an ocean voyage, it wasn't voluntary. Some nice sergeants were herding a variety of young men in soldier suits on to a vessel and I was one of the young men.

I didn't really want to leave land (being a lubber of the most fearful variety) and meant to tell the sergeants so. However, they seemed *so* careworn with their arduous duties, *so* melancholy at having to undertake the uncongenial task of telling other people what to do, that I didn't have the heart. I was afraid that if they found out one of the soldiers didn't really want to go, they might cry.

So I went aboard and we began the long six-day ocean voyage from San Francisco to Hawaii.

A luxury cruise it was not. The bunks were stacked four high and so were the soldiers. Sea-sickness was rampant and while I myself was not seasick even once (on my honor as a science fiction fan) that doesn't mean much when the guy in the bunk above decides to be.

My most grievous shock came the first night. I had been withstanding the swaying of the ship all day and had waited patiently for bedtime. Bedtime came; I got into my non-luxurious bunk and suddenly realized that *they didn't turn off the ocean at night!* The boat kept swaying, pitching, yawing, heaving, rolling and otherwise making a jackass of itself all night long! And every night!

You may well imagine, then, that what with one thing and another, I made that cruise in grim-lipped silence and was notable above all other men on board ship for my surly disposition.

Except once. On the third day out, it rained. Nothing remarkable,



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you think? Remember, I'm a landlubber. I had never seen it rain on the ocean; I had never *thought* of rain on the ocean. And now I saw it—a complete waste of effort. Tons of water hurling down for nothing; just landing in more water.

The thought of the futility of it all; of the inefficiency and sheer ridiculousness of a planetary design that allowed rain upon the ocean struck me so forcibly that I burst into laughter. The laughter fed upon itself and in no time at all, I was down on the deck, howling madly and flailing my arms and legs in wild glee—and getting rained on.

A sergeant (or somebody) approached and said, with warm and kindly sympathy, "What the hell's the matter with you, soldier? On your feet!"

And all I could say was, "It's raining! It's raining on the ocean!"

I kept on tittering about it all day, and that night all the bunks in the immediate neighborhood of mine were empty. The word had gone about (I imagine) that I was mad, and might turn homicidal at any moment.

But many times since, I have realized I shouldn't have laughed. I should have cried.

We here in the northeastern states are suffering from a serious drought and when I think of all the rain on the ocean and how nicely we could use a little bit of that rain on particular portions of dry land, I could cry right now.

I'll console myself as best I may, then, by talking about water.

Actually, the Earth is not short of water and never will be. In fact, we are in serious and continuing danger of too much water, if the warming trend continues and the ice-caps melt (see NO MORE ICE AGES? F & SF, January 1959).

But let's not worry about melting ice-caps this time out and just consider the Earth's water supply. To begin with, there is the ocean. I use the singular form of the noun because there is actually only one World Ocean; a continuous sheet of salt water in which the continents are set as large islands.

The total surface area of the World Ocean is 139,480,000 square miles, while the surface area of the entire planet is 196,950,000 square miles. As you see, then, the World Ocean covers 71 percent of the Earth's surface.

The World Ocean is arbitrarily divided into smaller units partly because in the early age of exploration, men weren't sure that there was a single ocean (this was first clearly demonstrated by the circumnavi-

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gation of the Earth by Magellan's expedition in 1519-1522) and partly because the continents do break up the World Ocean into joined segments which it is convenient to label separately.

Traditionally, one hears of the "Seven Seas" and indeed my globe and my various atlases do break up the World Ocean into seven subdivisions: 1) North Pacific, 2) South Pacific, 3) North Atlantic, 4) South Atlantic, 5) Indian, 6) Arctic, 7) Antarctic.

In addition, there are the smaller seas and bays and gulfs; portions of the ocean which are nearly surrounded by land as in the case of the Mediterranean Sea or the Gulf of Mexico, or marked off from the main body of the ocean by a line of islands, as in the case of the Caribbean Sea or the South China Sea.

Let's simplify this arrangement as far as possible. In the first place, let's consider all seas, bays and gulfs to be part of the ocean they adjoin. We can count the Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea as part of the North Atlantic, while the South China Sea is part of the North Pacific.

Second, there is no geophysical point in separating the North Pacific from the South Pacific, or the North Atlantic from the South Atlantic. (The conventional arbitrary dividing line in each case is the Equator.) Let's deal with a single Pacific Ocean and a single Atlantic Ocean.

Third, if you will look at a globe, you will see that the Arctic Ocean is not a truly separate ocean. It is an offshoot of the Atlantic Ocean to which it is connected by a thousand-mile-wide passage (the Norwegian Sea) between Greenland and Norway. Let's add the Arctic to the Atlantic, therefore.

Fourth, there is no Antarctic Ocean. The name is given to the stretch of waters neighboring Antarctica (which is the only portion of the globe where one can circumnavigate the planet along a parallel of latitude without being obstructed by land or by solid ice-sheets). However, there are no non-arbitrary boundaries between this stretch of water and the larger oceans to the north. The length of arbitrary boundary can be shortened by dividing the Antarctic among those larger oceans.

That leaves us, then, with exactly three large divisions of the World Ocean—the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean.

If you look at a globe, you will see that the Pacific Ocean and Atlantic Ocean stretch from north polar regions to south polar regions. The division between them in the north is clear cut, since the only connection is through the narrow Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia. A short arbitrary line, fifty-six miles in length can be drawn across that stretch of water to separate the oceans.

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In the south the division is less clear cut. An arbitrary line must be drawn across Drake Passage from the southernmost point of South America to the northernmost point of the Antarctic Peninsula. This line is about 600 miles long.

The Indian Ocean is the stubby one, stretching only from the tropics to the Antarctic Ocean (though it makes up for that by being wider than the Atlantic, which is the skinny one). The Indian Ocean is less conveniently separated from the other oceans. A north-south line from the southernmost points of Africa and Australia to Antarctica will separate the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic and Pacific respectively. The first of these lines is about 2500 miles long and the second 1800 miles long, which makes the demarcation pretty vague, but then I told you there's really only one ocean. In addition, the Indonesian islands separate the Pacific from the Indian.

The surface area of the three oceans, using these conventions, are, in round figures:

| | *surface area (square miles)* | *percent of World Ocean* |
|---|---|---|
| Pacific | 68,000,000 | 48.7 |
| Atlantic | 41,500,000 | 29.8 |
| Indian | 30,000,000 | 21.5 |

As you see, the Pacific Ocean is as large as the Atlantic and Indian put together. The Pacific Ocean is, by itself, 20 percent larger than all of Earth's land area. It's a big glob of water.

I was aware of this when I crossed the Pacific (well, half of it anyway) and I was also aware that when I was looking at all that water, I was seeing only the top of it.

The Pacific Ocean is not only the most spread out of the oceans but the deepest, with an average depth of about 2.6 miles. In comparison, the Indian Ocean has an average depth of about 2.4 miles and the Atlantic only about 2.1 miles. We can therefore work out the volume of the different oceans.

| | *volume (cubic miles)* | *percent of World Ocean* |
|---|---|---|
| Pacific | 177,000,000 | 52.2 |
| Atlantic | 87,000,000 | 25.7 |
| Indian | 75,000,000 | 22.1 |
| Total | 339,000,000 | |

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As you see then the water of the World Ocean is distributed among the three oceans in just about the ratio of 2:1:1.

The total, 339,000,000 cubic miles, is a considerable amount. It makes up 1/800 of the volume of the Earth—a most respectable fraction. If it were all accumulated into one place it would form a sphere about 864 miles in diameter. This is larger than any asteroid in the Solar system, probably larger than all the asteroids put together.

There is therefore no shortage of water. If the oceans were divided up among the population of the Earth, each man, woman and child would get a tenth of a cubic mile of ocean water. If you think that's not much (just a miserable tenth of a single cubic mile?) consider that that equals 110,000,000,000 gallons.

Of course, the ocean consists of sea water, which has limited uses. You can travel over it and swim in it—but you can't (without treatment) drink it, water your lawn with it, wash efficiently with it, or use it in industrial processes.

For all such vital operations, you need fresh water, and there the ready-made supply is much more limited. Ocean water (including a bit of inland salt water) makes up about 98.4 percent of all the water on Earth; and fresh water makes up 1.6 percent or about 5,800,000 cubic miles.

That doesn't sound too bad, but it's not the whole story. Fresh water exists in three phases, solid, liquid, and gaseous. (And, incidentally, let me interrupt myself to say that water is the *only* common substance on Earth that exists in all three phases; and the only one to exist chiefly in the liquid phase. All other common substances either exist solely in the gaseous state, as do oxygen and nitrogen; or solely in the solid state, as do silica and hematite.) The distribution of the fresh water supply of the Earth among the three phases is as follows:

| | *volume (cubic miles)* |
|---|---|
| Ice | 5,680,000 |
| Liquid fresh water | 120,000 |
| Water vapor (if condensed to liquid) | 3,400 |

Most of Earth's supply of fresh water is unavailable to us because it is tied up as ice. It is, of course, quite possible and even simple to melt ice, but the problem is one of location. Nearly 90 percent of the world's ice is compacted into the huge ice cap that covers Antarctica and most of the rest into the smaller sheet that covers Greenland.

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What's left (about 200,000 cubic miles) occurs as glaciers in the higher mountains and the smaller Arctic islands plus some polar sea-ice. All of this ice is quite out of the way.

That leaves us with just under 125,000 cubic miles of fresh water in liquid and gaseous form, and this represents the most valuable portion of the water resources of the planet. The fresh water supply is constantly running off into the sea through flowing rivers and seeping ground water, or evaporating into the air. This, however, is constantly replaced by rainfall. It is estimated that the total rainfall on all the land areas of the world amounts to 30,000 cubic miles per year. This means that one-quarter of the fresh water supply is replaced each year and if there were no rain at all anywhere, Earth's dry land would become dry indeed, for in four years (if one assumes that the rate of flow, seepage and evaporation remains constant) fresh water would be all gone.

If Earth's fresh water were evenly distributed among humanity, every man, woman and child would own 40,000,000 gallons and every year he could use 10,000,000 gallons of his supply, collecting rain-replacement in return.

But alas, the fresh water is not evenly distributed. Some areas on Earth have a far greater supply than they can use and other areas are parched. The maldistribution works in time as well as in space; for an area which is flooded one year may be drought-stricken the next.

The most spectacular reservoirs of fresh water are the lakes of the world. Of course, not all enclosed bodies of water are fresh. Only those bodies of water are fresh which have outlets to the ocean so that the efflux of water removes the salt dissolved out of the land and brought into the lake. Where a lake has no outlet to the ocean, it can lose water only through evaporation and the dissolved salts do not evaporate. More salt is constantly brought in by rivers feeding into the enclosed body and the result is a salt lake, in some cases saltier than the sea.

In fact, the largest inland body of water in the world—the Caspian Sea, located between the Soviet Union and Iran—is not fresh water. It has an area of 169,381 square miles, just about the size of California and it has 3,370 miles of shoreline.

It is sometimes stated that the Caspian Sea is not a sea but merely a lake, although a very large one. However, it seems to me that "lake" might well be restricted to enclosed bodies of *fresh* water. If "sea" is taken to mean salt water, whether in the ocean or not, then Caspian is indeed the Caspian *Sea*.

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The Caspian Sea is only 0.6 percent salt (as compared to the 3.5 percent salt of the oceans) but this is enough to make the waters of the Caspian undrinkable, except in the northwest corner where the fresh waters of the Volga River are discharged.

About 150 miles east of the Caspian is the Aral Sea, which is about 1.1 percent salt. It is twice as salty as the Caspian Sea, but it is much smaller in extent, with a surface area of only about 26,000 square miles—though that is enough to make it the fourth largest body of enclosed water in the world.

There are two other notable enclosed bodies of salt water. One is the Great Salt Lake (which I would much prefer to call the Utah Sea, since it is not "great", nor, by my definition, a lake) and the other is the Dead Sea. The Great Salt Lake is only 1500 square miles in area and the Dead Sea is smaller still—370 square miles. The Dead Sea is not much larger, in fact, than the five boroughs of New York City.

Nevertheless, these two relatively small bodies of water are unusual for extreme salinity. The Great Salt Lake is about 15 percent salt and the Dead Sea is about 25 percent salt, four times and seven times (respectively) as salty as the ocean.

However, looking at the surface of the water can be deceptive. How deep are these four inland seas? From data on the depth, we can work out the volume of each and the total salt * content, thus:

| | *Average depth (feet)* | *Volume (cubic miles)* | *Total Salt (tons)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Caspian Sea | 675 | 21,600 | 600,000,000,000 |
| Aral Sea | 53 | 260 | 13,000,000,000 |
| Dead Sea | 1080 | 75 | 86,500,000,000 |
| Great Salt Lake | 20 | 5.7 | 4,000,000,000 |

As you see, the tiny Dead Sea isn't so tiny after all. In terms of quantity of water it is much larger than the Great Salt Lake, and it contains 6½ times as much salt as the apparently much larger Aral Sea.

But let's turn to the true lakes—the enclosed bodies of fresh water. The largest such body in terms of surface area is Lake Superior, which is about as large as the state of South Carolina. It is usually listed as the second largest enclosed body of water on Earth (though, as I will show, it isn't really). It is, to be sure, a very poor second to the mighty

*The salt is not entirely sodium chloride by any means, but that's for another column some day. This one is concerned only with the water.

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Caspian, covering less than ⅕ the area of that body of water but remember, the water of Lake Superior is fresh.

Lake Superior is, however, only one of five American Great Lakes that are usually treated as separate bodies of water but which are neighboring and interconnected so that it is really quite fair to consider them all as making up one huge basin of fresh water. Statistics concerning them follow:

| | *Area (square miles)* | *Rank in size* | *Average depth (feet)* | *Volume (cubic miles)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Superior | 31,820 | 2 | 900 | 5,400 |
| Huron | 23,010 | 5 | 480 | 2,100 |
| Michigan | 22,400 | 5 | 600 | 2,600 |
| Erie | 9,940 | 12 | 125 | 240 |
| Ontario | 7,540 | 14 | 540 | 770 |
| Total | 94,710 | | | 11,110 |

Taken as a unit, as they should be, the American Great Lakes have a little over half the surface area and volume of the Caspian Sea. And they contain nearly one-tenth the total fresh water supply of the planet.

The only other group of lakes that can even faintly compare with the American Great Lakes are a similar series, considerably more separated, in East Africa. The three largest are Lakes Victoria, Tanganyika, and Nyasa, which I can lump together as the African Great Lakes. Here are the statistics:

| | *Area (square miles)* | *Rank in size* | *Average depth (feet)* | *Volume (cubic miles)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Victoria | 26,200 | 3 | 240 | 1,200 |
| Tanganyika | 12,700 | 8 | 1,900 | 4,500 |
| Nyasa | 11,000 | 11 | 1,800 | 3,800 |
| | 49,900 | | | 9,500 |

The African Great Lakes (two of them at least) are remarkable for their depth so that although they occupy an area of only slightly more than half that of the American Great Lakes, the volume of fresh water they contain almost rivals that present in our own larger but shallower lakes.

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But if we're going to talk about deep lakes, we've got to mention Lake Baikal in south central Siberia. Its area is 12,740 square miles, making it the 7th largest body of enclosed water on Earth, by the usual criterion of surface area. Its average depth, however, is 2,300 feet making it the deepest lake in the world. (Its maximum depth is 5,000 feet or nearly a mile. It is so deep, I was once told, that it is the only lake which contains the equivalent of deep-sea fish. If so, these are the only fresh-water, deep-sea fish in the world.)

Its depth means that Baikal contains 5,600 cubic miles of fresh water, more than that in Lake Superior.

The only remaining lakes that would fall in the category of "great lakes" are three in western Canada. The statistics on the average depth of these Canadian Great Lakes are virtually non-existent. I have the figures on maximum depth for two of them and nothing at all for the third. However, I shall make what I hope is an intelligent guess just to see what things look like:

| | *Area (square miles)* | *Rank in size* | *Average depth (feet)* | *Volume (cubic miles)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Great Bear | 11,490 | 9 | 240 | 525 |
| Great Slave | 11,170 | 10 | 240 | 510 |
| Winnipeg | 9,398 | 13 | 50 | 90 |

Now we are in a position to list the bodies of enclosed water in the order of their real size, their fluid contents rather than their surface area. To be sure, surface area of any lake can be determined with reasonable accuracy, whereas the fluid contents can only be roughly estimated so it makes sense to list them in order of decreasing surface area. However, I will do as I choose. The fourteen largest bodies of enclosed water (in terms of surface area) rank as follows in terms of fluid content:

| | *Volume (cubic miles)* |
|---|---|
| *Caspian | 21,600 |
| Baikal | 5,600 |
| Superior | 5,400 |
| Tanganyika | 4,500 |
| Nyasa | 3,800 |
| Michigan | 2,600 |

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| | |
|---|---|
| Huron | 2,100 |
| Victoria | 1,200 |
| Ontario | 770 |
| Great Bear | 525 |
| Great Slave | 510 |
| *Aral | 260 |
| Erie | 240 |
| Winnipeg | 90 |

**do not contain fresh water*

This list is a very rough one with several of the figures so rough as to be worthless. In addition there are lakes with smaller areas than any on the list which are deep enough to deserve a listing somewhere ahead of Winnipeg. These include Lake Ladoga and Lake Onega in the northwestern stretch of European Russia, and Lake Titicaca in the Andes between Bolivia and Peru.

But what's the use? All this talk about water isn't helping the parching northeast at all. Indeed, the water level in the American Great Lakes has been falling disturbingly in recent years, I understand, and even the Caspian Sea is shrinking.

Maybe old mother Earth is getting tired of us.—In my more morose moments, I wonder if I could bring myself to blame her if she were.

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## ADDENDUM

By the way, I have a duty I should have attended to many months ago but (to coin a glittering new phrase) better late than never. In my essay ROLL CALL (F & SF, December 1963), I discussed the origin of the names of the various bodies of the Solar system. Independently, science-fiction fan Philip N. Bridges had previously prepared a charming article on the subject from a somewhat different angle. He calls it *Space Age Terminology*.

Mr. Bridges is more interested in correct usage of planetary names, rather than in mere derivations (a more useful and less frivolous involvement than mine, you see) and, for instance, advocates what he maintains to be correctly derived words such as Venustian and Hesperian for hypothetical inhabitants of Venus in place of the incorrect Venusian or Cytherean; and Tellus and Tellurian in place of Terra and Terran. He lists astronomers and classical scholars who support his views.

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*The story you are about to read has been languishing in our inventory for an inordinately long time, so that all we can tell you about the author is that a couple of years ago he was a 25-year-old English teacher and graduate student with a penchant toward hitch-hiking, bus riding, and similar rootless activities. We hope that he has since settled down long enough to write more stories like this delightful farce—a clever twist on the "if" theme—e. g., if John Wilkes Booth had been a bathtub salesman . . .*

# MINOR ALTERATION

## by John Thomas Richards

THE ROOM WAS MORE COMfortable than clinical. The walls were an intimate brown, and the straw-colored upholstery of the contour couch blended pleasingly with the doctor's blond furniture and secretary. The indirect illumination and tasteful furnishings were a surprise to Walter Bird. He had half expected a psychoanalyst's office to look like some dusky torture chamber inhabited by a lean and sinister Merlin who would use his inmost secrets for blackmail.

"Dr. Altstetter?"

The man behind the desk looked up. The psychoanalyst was large with middle-age spread; he buttoned his vest as he rose to shake Walter's hand with a firm and fatherly grasp. Walter warmed to him at once, and the polite preliminaries were soon over. "Call me doc," the man said, and Walter did.

"There's nothing really wrong, er, 'doc'," Walter apologized at length. "Mary just has these worrying spells, and you know how women are. She says I wake up drunk some mornings, and I swear I'm a teetotaler. When I told her about these dreams, she said I ought to see you. She said dreams always mean something."



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"Not always," Altstetter smiled. "I used to dream about large green grasshoppers wearing corduroy knickers and red bow ties."

Walter was intrigued. "What did they mean?"

The doctor thought for a moment, and shrugged. "Personal," he improvised. He had never given a damn about the grasshoppers; that foolishness was for patients.

"Your wife mentioned that you were worried, that you didn't eat much and couldn't sleep." Walter took a fountain pen from his shirt pocket and vibrated it between his thumb and forefinger until it appeared to bend as though it were made of rubber; although Alstetter had seen the optical illusion before, his eyes professed interest. After a while, Walter nodded. He had not slept for more than a few minutes the night before, and that had been a mistake.

"She's right, doc, but not sleeping isn't my problem. I can't afford to sleep. Every time I go to sleep, I become *him*." He looked up. The doctor's moon face seemed suspended miles away.

"You become someone else when you go to sleep?"

Walter hastened to explain. "I dream I'm this guy, the same fellow every time. I know I'm me when I wake up, but I'm just as much me when I'm him, only I'm him. I mean, I think like he does and act like he does because I'm him, only I'm . . ." Walter looked up nervously, and Dr. Altstetter nodded his understanding.

"It's just been for the last two months. At first it was only once or twice a week, but lately it's been every night. I'm in Washington. I mean, he's in Washington and I'm in him. Anyway, I'm in Washington, D. C., it's just after the War Between the States, and I'm awfully disappointed because the South lost. That's all I ever think about . . . I mean, that's all I think about when I'm him. The war's over, we've lost, and I've got to get even. I mean, really, doc, I never cared about the Confederacy not winning the war before now. Even when I read about it in school, I was always kind of glad the North won."

"Yes," the doctor commented, "I know what you mean. You associate yourself with a Confederate soldier who was defeated. Do you think you might be projecting some defeat you've experienced in business or at home? Have you lost many arguments to your wife in the last two months?"

"I don't remember; Mary and I don't argue much. One thing you didn't get straight, doc. In these dreams, I'm not a Confederate soldier. It sounds silly, I guess," he stammered, and vibrated the pen between his fingers for moral support.

"You aren't a defeated soldier, but you are a Southern sympathizer?"

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"I'm John Wilkes Booth."

He paused to see whether or not the doctor would gasp in dismay; then, disappointed, he continued. "I don't believe in all this Bridie Murphy business, but I'm living here," he gestured vaguely out the window at greater St. Louis, "as Walter Bird, an ordinary plumbing fixtures salesman, married two years now with a kid on the way. The crazy part of it is, I know I'm also living as John Wilkes Booth in April of 1865, and I'm going to shoot President Lincoln tomorrow night." He glared up at Altstetter like an enraged sparrow, and the doctor fumbled for a moment in his desk before he found the small cardboard box.

"These are tranquilizing capsules," he explained, offering the box to Walter. "They should insure a night of dreamless sleep. If it's not inconvenient, I'll put you down for an appointment at four-thirty again tomorrow."

It was not inconvenient. That night Walter took the tranquilizers before he went to bed.

He sat on the creaking bed and felt the rawhide springs go taunt under his thighs. He ran tapering fingers through his disheveled hair and felt experimentally; his whole body tingled with the lingering pin-pricks of what must have been a monumental spree. John Wilkes Booth had never experienced a tranquilizer hangover before.

He shuffed off the nightgown and knotted the tassled cord of the dressing gown about his waist, then tilted the tin pitcher over the cracked pewter basin.

As Booth washed and shaved, the clatter of dinner dishes reminded him that Mrs. Frazer would be more happy if he missed the mid-day meal which served most of his fellow actors as breakfast. A theatrical boarding-house never had quite enough food on hand, especially in these days of wartime scarcity and a general inflation of the entire economy.

*Tomorrow,* he thought, *everything will be different.*

As he buttoned on the freshly starched collar and adjusted the heavy Brummel knot of his grey silk tie, he bowed slightly to the face which was framed in the oval mirror.

*Tomorrow,* he thought, *yours will be the most famous visage in all America.* He fluffed the thick sideburns away from his ears and rubbed beeswax into the luxuriant moustache, twisting the ends to needle points and curving them slightly downward to droop fashionably.

He would get the gun, meet with Scott and the others in the doctor's office, and not meet again until after it was finished, he thought. He had expected a moment of indecision and dread, but now that the day had come he felt strangely listless and peaceful.

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That would never do. He spoke aloud to the face in the mirror:

*'Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,*
*I have not slept.*
*Between the acting of a dreadful thing*
*And the first motion, all the interim is*
*Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream."*

That's a damnable lie, he thought. The pearl stickpin slipped from his fingers as he gestured, it slid under the commode which tastefully concealed a useful chamber appliance. He knelt gingerly, preserving the crease in his fawn-colored trousers, and groped for the tie pin.

"Hellfire!"

He picked the splinter from under his index fingernail and popped the finger into his mouth. Fishing out the stickpin he hurried downstairs, vibrating the pin between his fingers as he went.

The other boarders had almost finished eating, and had left very little for Booth to gnaw. He felt a flash of annoyance; it was a shabby way for them to treat the man who would save them from tyranny's despotic grasp.

The ex-infantryman opposite belched lightly, and Booth wrinkled his nose.

*Faschious slave, slobbering over a capon's greasy wing, little do you realize . . .*" Aloud, he requested, "Pass the greens."

John Wilkes Booth strolled down the narrow, twisting, cobbled street. To his left, from the crest of the hill, he could see the Capitol rising above the squalor and mire of clustering tenements and shanties; its bulk lying like a steamboat run aground on some mudbank, the workmen moving like ants against its half-finished dome.

The little pawn shop was squeezed between two mercantile establishments. Two of the brass spheres were gone; probably, Booth surmised, captured as spoils by some ragamuffin during a scrap-metal hunt, when brass for the field cannon and those new self-igniting cartridges had brought wartime prices.

He entered the narrow shop. The proprietor hobbled from behind a tattered curtain, accompanied by the odor of coal smoke and sauerkraut.

"I have come to redeem my pistol. I left it here over a month ago."

"Pistol? Pistol? In a little case?" He indicated the size with his hands, drawing an outline in the air. Booth nodded.

"Yep, here it be." The old man dropped the cedar case upon the counter and leafed through his worn account-book. "Six dollar gold I lent you, Mr. Booth. Said you wanted a share in that Pennsylvania feller's oil well."

"I did. Someday soon my wealth

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shall exceed that of Gould and all his New York scum, singly or combined."

"That so? Well, it was six dollars gold, remember."

"These cuff links are worth twenty." The pawnbroker squinted and shook his head.

"Six dollars gold."

"But, my good man, the cuff links are worth . . ."

The old man shook his head. Relenting, he dug among the assortment of pledges on the shelf behind him and picked a rusty Mexican dagger from the jumble. "You need something account of the thievein', this hog-butcher'll do the trick. Good Spanish steel in it. Take it for the cuff links?"

"Oh, Shylock, thy profit is assured." Booth felt for the tie pin. "I need that gun. You can have this stickpin, and make up the balance in cash. It's a real pearl," he added contemptuously. The pawnbroker examined the pearl under a dusty ray of light, then grunted agreement.

"The gun, knife, and fifteen Union horseblankets for the cuff links and pin. You realize it's cuttin' my own throat to make a deal like this, Mister Booth, but ever'body knows you're a gentleman." The old man peeled off the green-backed bills quickly; he did not intend to give the actor any more gold just yet. "You sure must want that gun bad. Gonna do a dutch?" He grinned slyly and put his forefinger against his right temple. "Bang," he said, under his breath, and gave a cackling laugh. His customer, engrossed in loading the derringer, completely ignored the old man's witticism.

Booth measured a light charge of powder into a square of India paper and wrapped the cartridge tight. He pricked the base of the cartridge with a quill and forced it down the derringer's barrel. The ball came next; he rammed it home and bounced the wooden rod lightly to see that the charge was seated properly. A few grains of powder were shaken expertly into the nipple and, the hammer at half cock, Booth crimped the percussion cap in place. The pistol slid easily into his vest pocket, while the sheathed dagger and the pistol case were dropped carelessly into the hip pocket of his greatcoat.

As his customer was leaving, the pawnbroker remarked "Mr. Booth, I sure did enjoy seein' your brother play-actin' in *Julius Caesar* Saturday night. You know," he reminisced, now that the business transaction was over, "I once seen your father, must a' been in '46, and I swan to Ian' I never did see any man play Brutus like Junius Bruts Booth did. Your brother Edwin played him good, too," he added quickly, not wishing to play favorites.

Booth paused dramatically at the door. "This night I shall play

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Brutus as Brutus has never been played before!" Then he was gone.

"And that's when I woke up," concluded Walter Bird weakly. He nursed the index finger of his right hand absently as he spoke. The psychoanalyst thumbed over to a fresh page in his notebook and wrote a few words.

"And your finger? You're certain you didn't injure it before you went to sleep?" Walter sat up on the couch and extended the finger. There was a visible swelling, but no wound.

"I stuck a splinter under it in the dream, like I said. Having his hangovers was bad enough, but if everything that hurts him is going to hurt me . . ." He wiggled the pen rapidly between his fingers as he contemplated the possible implications of his situation.

"Yeah, sure! I felt good after that pill when I was him . . . when I was he . . ." Walter's problem of sentence structure had seldom occurred before. "What I mean is," he explained, "It's not just our minds. Let me look at one of your books, doc."

Walter flipped the pages of the encyclopedia rapidly.

"Bartholemew . . . beekeeping . . . blacking . . . bookbinding . . . boot . . . Booth, Edwin . . . Booth, John Wilkes!" There was only a brief paragraph devoted to John Wilkes Booth. Walter read it in silence and then read it again.

*BOOTH, JOHN WILKES (1839-65), American actor, assassin of President Lincoln, was born in Harford Co., Md., in 1839. He was the son of Junius Brutus, and the brother of Edwin Thomas Booth* (q.v.) *and an actor of prominence. He sympathized with the South in the American Civil War, and in 1865 organized a conspiracy to assassinate the President, the Vice-President and members of the cabinet. On the night of April 14, 1865, while Lincoln was watching a play from a box at Ford's Theatre in Washington, Booth stealthily entered the box and discharged a pistol at the head of the president from behind, the ball penetrating the brain. Brandishing a huge knife, the assassin rushed through the stage-box, leaped down upon the stage and escaped from the building. He was pursued, and twelve days later was shot in a barn where he had concealed himself.*

Walter Bird was shaking slightly when he put down the volume. "They're going to shoot him down like an animal when he gets cornered in that barn, doc. Then what's going to happen to me? Anyhow, I don't want him to kill President Lincoln tonight. On my way home yesterday I stopped by Woolworth's like I always do, to lean up against the magazine rack and read for a few minutes. There

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was this paperback about Lincoln. He sure knew a lot of jokes, doc; he was a great guy."

Dr. Altstetter nodded. "If Lincoln had lived, he would have prevented the Yankee radicals from wrecking the South during the Reconstruction period. Johnson wasn't capable of opposing them and Grant was worse than useless, his whole administration was corrupt. John Wilkes Booth hurt the South worse than Sherman and Grant combined. You said he thought the people would carry him on their shoulders in a torchlight parade while he accepted their cheers with a gracious smile and a wave of his blood-stained hands. If he had only known, only realized . . ."

Walter Bird asked hesitantly, "Do you think maybe I could . . . you know, make him realize?" He shifted from one foot to the other, tapping the pen against his belt buckle, sorry he had spoken but trying to explain his idea. "I mean, when I'm him, I'm still me, only I'm him." Altstetter's pained expression reminded Walter that they had been through that line of reasoning before.

"Oh?" asked the doctor; his voice was without inflection and slightly bored.

"Whatever it is, soul or something, it goes back and forth between us. Couldn't you fix it so I'll know what's going to happen when I'm him, and not shoot Lincoln?"

"I could try deep hypnosis; possibly this fluxating self of yours could keep your own identity, but . . . you know it's just a dream, man!" It had been a long time since he had a subject for hypnosis, and Altstetter needed the practice. "It's not going to happen tonight; Lincoln died over ninety-two years ago. You can't change that." Dr. Altstetter dropped his head into his hands, his eyes gleaming. *"But if you only could . . .* how does anyone know you can't alter the course of history until you try? It would be so different, so much better, if the South had never been sacked, if Lincoln could only have finished his second term . . . *I'll do it.* I ought to be locked up and tied in a straight jacket, but I'll do it!"

"Oh, now, if you don't think we ought to," Walter hedged nervously. He didn't like any allusion to being locked up, a straight jacket was a torture instrument they used on crazy people, and he had read in the latest issue of *Men's Adventure* all about the things people did when they were hypnotized.

Altstetter reassured him.

"It's common therapy with dreams that won't go away," Altstetter lied. "It's like that tranquilizer. It didn't hurt you." Altstetter failed to remind Walter that it hadn't helped him either. "Now," said the doctor, pressing his patient gently but firmly onto the couch, "just lean back . . . relax . . . that's it."

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"Well . . . okay, if you're *sure* . . ." Walter grumbled, but obliged. The idea *had* been his. The doctor murmured soothing phrases over and over.

He spoke gently of wheatfields swaying and rippling under the drowsy noontide sun . . . of a boat under a shady bank, rocking, rocking with the easy ululations of a dark and placid stream . . . of a cradle in a nursery baby Walter in the cradle and the cradle gently rocking safe beside his mother's knee . . .

The doctor muttered softly, and noted with satisfaction that the words of his sleeptalk brought a gradual relaxation to Walter's tense frame. There were the suggestions, the commands.

Half an hour later, only a shallow movement of the patient's chest told Dr. Altstetter that Walter was still alive.

Unnoticed, the fountain pen had slipped from Walter's nerveless fingers. Had the doctor stooped his ample girth and sighted along this pen, a maneuvre almost as grotesque as it was unthinkable (at least unthought; it did not, at any rate, occur), he might have seen, certainly without noticing, a book which occupied the interspace third left from the corner, bottom shelf.

Now, the pages of this book, for the remaining few hours of its existence, were uncut past the first three chapters. Altstetter had begun reading one day several months before, but a patient had interrupted (it was the day that the mayor's nephew crowned a cowering corner Satan with Altstetter's ceramic inkstand) and *The Education of Henry Adams* remained unread by the one person in that single remaining segment of heretofore-unalterable time who might have . . .

. . . *but did not, could not, couldn't have* . . .

*"Henry Adams, grandson of an Early Rebel-Colonial president, perished, a suspected partisan, during the Siege of Chartres. Notes discovered among his belongings indicate that his execution was justified; one document, a purported biography, contained not only the expected and understandable Anti-Empiric propaganda, but information which was classified 'Top Secret' by none other than General Fitz-Hughes Warburton, who personally deposited the material in question with Sir Cecil Poole, Dept. of Empiric Expansion Security."**

"John, you're not listening to me. You asked about the President's party and I went to all the trouble of finding out from Harold and now you're just ignoring me!" The red-haired girl flicked at the

*(Twomby, Lady Clara H. *Sociological Development During the Expansionist Period*, pg. 591. G.B.E. Publications, Manchester, G.B.E.—One. 1951)

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delicately engraved handle of her tarnished silver teacup with a scarlet fingernail and pouted.

"It's . . . my head. Something's trying to get inside my head!"

For several seconds the brain of John Wilkes Booth was the scene of a fierce and highly painful struggle. The self that was John Wilkes Booth was a strong and egocentric personality with a frantic will to survive, but the self that was Walter Bird had struck without warning and fought hawklike, relentlessly, to control Booth's body.

For those several seconds, the man searched for his own identity, he sifted in frenzy through memories overlapped like panes of glass fused one upon another and then broken into wriggling fragments. He was Walter John Bird Wilkes Booth; he acted/sold bathtubs and toilet bowls; his brother Edwin had been killed in Korea; it was April fourteenth May fifth 1865/1961 . . .

The man struck at his right temple savagely, his fist clenched.

*He was in a psychoanalyst's office. He was in a tea room with Cissie Altstetter Dr. Keene the actress. He was going to kill Lincoln. He was going to save Lincoln. He was . . .*

The two personalities gathered themselves together and clashed in a last frenzied combat, then crystallized into random thoughts like beads on a string. John Wilkes Booth's body trembled violently and then relaxed against the red plush upholstery of the booth.

Walter's personality, equipped with Booth's memories as well as his own, had taken command of the actor's body.

"John, you've been drinking again. If you don't want to listen . . ." She gave a haughty brush with one hand to her lop-sided pompadour and rose to leave.

"I'm okay now. Don't go." The girl paused, bewildered.

"Oh, Kay? What does that mean?"

"Why, it means . . . it means my headache's gone. Please sit down, Cissie. What were you saying when I so rudely interrupted?" The final elegant words flowed without a conscious effort on Walter's part, and the actress allowed herself to be mollified.

"I just told you about Mr. Stanton's boycotting Mr. Lincoln's party tonight. Did you see the parade this morning?"

"Parade?"

"General Grant came in on the nine o'clock train and they had a parade to his hotel with the Zouave Marching Band and everything. The streets were so crowded someone knocked my new straw kitsey right off my head and a dray horse stepped on it; after all this war, nobody knows how to treat a lady any more. I'd have scratched his clumsy eyes out, if it hadn't been Mr. Whitman. He's a clerk,"

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she explained, "but he writes awfully funny poems about men and all. I like him, but, naturally," she amended, "I like Harold better."

"Harold? Oh, of course, Harold!" Walter knew he should remember who Harold was. There was a Harold who overcharged for repairing his television set; there was a Harold who was Cissie Keene's beau. The latter Harold was one of Vice-President Johnson's secretaries.

"You're jealous, John! You know Harold." She tittered provocatively. "I had dinner with him today at the Shetland." A curl of her lips compared the Shetland Hotel's luxurious dining facilities with the threadbare tea room in which she now sat. "He said he couldn't see my performance tonight, he had to wait for a telegram confirming Jackson's surrender or something."

Walter wiggled his spoon between his fingers and said nothing.

"Will you be there? *Our American Cousin* goes off the boards tonight. Oh, do come John; Mr. Lincoln's party won't attract any crowd with Grant in town, and I want somebody to clap for me." She glanced at the small gold watch pinned to her lapel and emitted a slight, affected squeal. It was time for Milady to assume her role. "I had no idea it was so late! You must excuse me, John. The curtain rises promptly at eight, and I scarcely have time to prepare myself. You are coming tonight, John," she insisted. "Just for me?" He rose automatically, with exaggerated courtesy.

"Possibly. I had intended it." He watched the curtain of the booth swing together behind her. *It would do no harm to just go and watch the play. No!*

Later, he adjusted his beaver hat and stepped out of the tea room into the April dusk. The little pistol was a hard lump over his heart, while the gun case and dagger slapped through the coat's lining against his hips as he walked.

At eight o'clock, one block west of the theatre, he was passed by a trim, freshly-painted barouche drawn by a black mare. In the darkened street, illuminated by an occasional taper swinging in its lattaced box on the corners, Walter was unable to see the occupants' features distinctly. One, he was certain, was a rather stout woman; another, gaunt and bearded, wore a shawl and stovepipe hat. They were soon lost from sight in the tangle of drays, carriages and pedestrians that clogged the narrow street at theatre-hour.

As he passed an alleyway behind the theatre, there was a short whistle. Walter turned his head without breaking stride. Charlie, the Negro boy who was to hold his horse, appeared briefly at the entrance to the alley with adoration shining in his eyes. The boy was a stand-in, Walter remembered;

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Beams could not be there that night. Charlie tried to raise one eyebrow and lower the other conspiratorially, then gave a melodramatic two-fingered salute and slipped back into the darkness from which he had come.

John Wilkes Booth's body hesitated before the theatre entrance, buffeted by the crowds that swept by, the ticket halfway out of his pocket, then walked past Ford's Theatre and on, to the railway station, with his derringer unfired. He purchased a ticket to Philadelphia and relaxed on one of the narrow wooden benches lightly covered with green plush. The dubious comfort of the seat and the grinding rattle of the station's turntable in the rail yard seemed to blend in Walter's mind with the weariness of relief. He wedged his shoulders against the backrest and closed his eyes.

"Well, old boy, I take it you're up to snuff?"

Walter sensed a subtle change in the office almost before he awoke. The couch was the same, but the upholstery was no longer plastic. Walter felt the material under his hand, it was rough and scratchy like wool. The tan walls had changed to an ugly butternut shade. There was a massive, carved oaken desk in the center of the room. A small chandelier had replaced the indirect florescent lighting, and Walter was certain that he could smell kerosene burning.

"I observe," the doctor said, "you've suffered no ill effects from mesmerization, although I still cannot fathom why you suffered from the delusion that you nightly became an obscure Nineteenth Century actor. You may pay my secretary as you leave." The psychoanalyst glanced pointedly at the Bristol clock over the door; the appointment was over and he was a busy man.

"Oh, come off it, doc . . . wait a minute, you're not Altstetter! Your face is like his, but you don't talk the same." As an afterthought, Walter almost added, "The doc wasn't any walking skeleton, either." He could see as he spoke that the doctor was Altstetter; a strangely altered Altstetter, but the same man.

"I beg to remind you that a Grade Five Colonist has no privilege to criticize his superiors. I," Altstetter announced proudly, with a twitch of his nose, "am Grade Three. Although I must admit I was born in Austria-Hungary, my internship was spent in Montreal and I am licensed to practice anywhere in the Empire."

"Hot damn. Look, doc, what is this bit?"

"You doubt that I am qualified?" This bird-like little man *might* be a knightspy, but Altstetter doubted it. "Here! My diploma!" The psychoanalyst snatched

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the framed document from off the wall and thrust it two inches in front of Walter's eyes. It certified that Edward George Altstetter, Grade Three Citizen Freeman, had graduated with all due honours, etcetera, from the Royal Psychoanalytic Academy at Montreal during the reign of Edward Regent. Before the diploma was snatched away by the irate psychoanalyst, Walter had time to notice that it was newly validated by the Queen-Empress's stamped signature.

It took slight time to pacify Altstetter who, in spite of his pompous rage of injured dignity, tired easily under emotional stress. When Altstetter, exhausted, collapsed upon the couch, Walter thumbed through a volume of *The Encyclopedia Britannica* from the untidy bookcase.

There was a brief sentence which stated that Edwin Booth had a brother named John Wilkes, also an actor, who was implicated in an unsuccessful plot against the Lincoln administration but was never convicted.

Under the heading of *Lincoln, Abraham,* there was more information and a notation that the reader could better inform himself by looking under *Mismanagement, The Era Of*. Walter Bird read both articles and skimmed through a brief history of the past hundred years.

Abraham Lincoln had been the first president of the United States to be elected to office for three consecutive terms, although his successor, Fisk, the last president of the United States of America, had served four terms before assuming the title of Director. Both administrations were characterized by inflation, corruption, and a laissez-faire attitude toward the defeated, looted South, which in 1875 eventually seceded only to find that an obvious by-product of the Industrial-Revolution Expansion had replaced cotton with machine-spun flax and mass-produced wool. There was a brief war between the Confederate States of America (*Secondus*) and Mexico in 1880, after which the Confederace was heard from no more. In 1889, after the assassination of Director Tweed, there was a brief period of anarchy in the Union states. (See: *Golden Age, The*). By 1898, however, all portions of what had once been the United States of America were assimilated as a part of Canada.

The British Empire Expansionist Movement, as any primary student knows, gained its impetus during the aforementioned Era of Mismanagement. When Victoria Regenta followed her untimely Albert (the Queen was unalterably opposed to the Expansionist policies despite overwhelming evidence provided by the Lincolnists themselves that her support of the Union states was far from pru-

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dent), an immediate reaction against these pro-Union policies was effected. The building economic tide swung, as sound judgement prevailed, sharply away from the floundering, dissolving "Union" to Canada and, ultimately, to England.

"The Development of Central Economy (Primus and Secundus)" failed to rouse Walter's interest, and he rapidly scanned titles and sub-titles dealing with the logic of oligarcal government. The wars were more interesting.

The British Empire had declared war upon Germany and France in 1902. Needless to say, the British Empire won. There had been five major global conflicts in the past fifty years. The outcome of each was approximately identical; the names of the heroes, only, changed. As did geography: by 1961 the sun did not only refuse to set upon the British Empire, it shone upon very few places which did not owe the Empire their allegiance.

There was no mention of a Russian revolution. There was very little mention of a Russia after the War of 1939.

Atomic, hydrogen and cobalt bombs had been developed under the Scientific Emphasis Board's supervision during the 1930's, and had proven invaluable in pacifying the belligerent and ill-advised rebels. (See: *Craters; Brazilian, Asian, Ozarkian*)

Sterility due to radioactive poisoning had become a major problem in all countries by the mid-1950's due to global circulation of air currents, but scientists in various portions of the Empire were reputed to be on the verge of developing a serum which would protect those citizens of Grade One-A-Double Plus and above; this measure, it was generally felt, would assure that the human race would not lack the leadership necessary for survival and for growth.

There were no private motorcars for citizens below Grade Two; thus the parking problems and congestion of thoroughfares typical of an earlier day had to a great measure disappeared.

Women's dress styles had been dictated by London since Paris ceased to exist in 1942.

Lindburg had flown halfway across the Atlantic.

Two rockets, manned by Colonial volunteers, succeeded in reaching the moon in 1957. They had forgotten to return, and the Royal Interplanetary Society had since that time confined their explorations of space to the telescope.

Wages were low.

Taxes were high.

Food was minimal.

Knightspies were everywhere.

Freedom was disloyalty; rights were impractical. (*See: Mismanagement, Mob*)

Elizabeth II was Queen-Empress.

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There was a great deal more, but Walter did not read further. While Altstetter rested, gnawing his knuckles as he slept, Walter raised the window and looked down.

Far below him a shifting mass of gaunt grey shapes scurried to and fro, dominated by a machine which appeared to be the illegitimate offspring of a threshing machine, sired by a 1928 Cadillac touring sedan. As he watched, a platoon of maroon-uniformed infantrymen clumped past.

Walter Bird felt no desire to examine the world which he had created any closer.

There was a muffled knocking on the outer office door, a slithering of patent leather pumps as the doctor's secretary minced across the room, and the sound of her voice informing the visitor that the doctor had seen his last patient for the day. Papers rustled, and there was a quick, indrawn gasp of dismay from the girl in the next room.

Walter glanced at the psychoanalyst. Altstetter snored softly on the couch. Walter tiptoed with exaggerated caution and put his eye to the crack in the inner office door.

A little man in a bowler hat with a notebook under his arm was speaking softly while the wide-eyed secretary nodded and gestured toward the office door. The girl asked some question, and the man shook his head and shrugged without expression.

"For disloyal utterances, I assume."

"But . . . but he's the most loyal man I know!" It could cost her plenty, Walter knew, but she choked out her defense of Altstetter.

"My dear young lady, the court has already made its decision. I assure you, you have been cleared of any complicity; your position will not be altered unless your new employer finds you . . . unsatisfactory." The little man had a prissy voice and the manner of a bank examiner who had just discovered a deficiency in his worst enemy's accounts. If *this* was a knightspy, Walter decided, he would never read another copy of *"O.S.S. Adventures."*

Walter did not know whether to bow or salute when the knightspy entered the room. The little man solved this problem by completely ignoring Walter, who shifted from one foot to another and pretended to be engrossed in *The Encyclopedia Britannica,* Volume 3, Baltim to Brail.

The knightspy carefully removed a small atomizer from his coat pocket, thrust one nozzle gentle up each of the sleeping doctor's nostrils, and depressed the bulb once.

The psychoanalyst jerked erect.

"What have you done to him, sir?" The girl, her job assured, seemed to Walter more curious than concerned.

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"This nasal spray contains reserpine," the little man explained, cleaning the moisture from the atomizer with a small linen handkerchief. "For the next few hours, he will feel no pain and will obey all orders. It's really much more convenient than marching him downtown in handcuffs."

"Pardon me, sir," Walter ventured, not at all certain as to the correct form of address for knightspies, "but do you mean that Dr. Altstetter will do anything anyone tells him?" The knightspy pocketed the atomizer and answered as a gentleman should, without condescension or familiarity.

"Certainly, for a period of from two to six hours."

"Thank you," said Walter, and bludgeoned him down with the encyclopedia. "Sic semper whatchamacallet," he muttered. The secretary fled screaming. Walter locked the door behind her.

"I say," said Altstetter.

"Shut up," said Walter.

Altstetter sank back on the couch with an expression of tranquility upon his face and remained silent.

Walter found, to his surprise, that he enjoyed giving orders. "Doc, if that creep wakes up and so much as bats an eyelash, I want you to throw him out the window." He remembered reading a similar statement, and thought vaguely that it would be appropriate under the circumstances.

Altstetter nodded happily.

"I order you to hypnotize me like you did before, so I'll dream I'm John Wilkes Booth. Use that deep hypnosis stuff, and don't let anything butt in on you." Walter thought it best not to mention that the distraction might be caused by someone breaking down the door. "Hypnotize me," Walter commanded.

Altstetter obeyed.

The train was just shuddering into motion when Walter elbowed his way down the aisle, ignored the startled squeaking of the conductor who had just reached for his ticket, threw open the carriage door and jumped.

After brushing the sand and cinders from his knees, he climbed onto the platform and hurried through the station. There were several hacks leaving the station, and John Wilkes Booth scrambled toward a hansom carriage.

"Taxi!" he shouted; then, remembering, "Cab!" The clock on the large stucco pillar before the station read nine-twenty; Cissie had mentioned that the play was not long.

The driver was more than willing to earn a double fee from a young senator who had urgent business at Ford's Theatre. ◄

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*The successful creation of a Fantasy Other-World is a gift which too few writers possess. Jack Vance is one of those writers. He achieves what another, J. R. R. Tolkien, calls "the inner consistency of reality," the ability to keep a story true to itself. This story is about the adventures of Cugel the Clever. You will be transported to the strange land known as Almery, from there to the stranger land once known as Cutz. We are confident that it all will shortly become as familiar and comfortable as your living room—and probably a good deal more enchanting. For Mr. Vance is a master storyteller, and he has designed this tale with movement and humor and insight.*

# THE OVERWORLD

## *by Jack Vance*

ON THE HEIGHTS ABOVE THE river Xzan, at the site of certain ancient ruins, Iucounu the Laughing Magician had built a manse to his private taste: an eccentric structure of steep gables, balconies, sky-walks, cupolas, together with three spiral green glass towers through which the red sunlight shone in twisted glints and peculiar colors.

Behind the manse and across the valley, low hills rolled away like dunes to the limit of vision. The sun projected shifting crescents of black shadow; otherwise the hills were unmarked, empty, solitary. The Xzan, rising in the Old Forest to the east of Almery, passed below, then three leagues to the west made junction with the Scaum. Here was Azenomei, a town old beyond memory, notable now only for its fair, which attracted folk from all the region. At Azenomei Fair Cugel had established a booth for the sale of talismans.

Cugel was a man of many capabilities, with a disposition at once flexible and pertinacious. *He was long of leg, deft of hand, light of finger, soft of tongue. His hair was the blackest of black fur, growing low down his forehead, coving sharply back above his eyebrows. His darting eye, long inquisitive*



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*nose and droll mouth gave his somewhat lean and bony face an expression of vivacity, candor, and affability.* He had known many vicissitudes, gaining therefrom a suppleness, a fine discretion, a mastery of both bravado and stealth. Coming into the possession of an ancient lead coffin—after discarding the contents—he had formed a number of leaden lozenges. These, stamped with appropriate seals and runes, he offered for sale at the Azenomei Fair.

Unfortunately for Cugel, not twenty paces from his booth a certain Fianosther had established a larger booth with articles of greater variety and more obvious efficacy, so that whenever Cugel halted a passerby to enlarge upon the merits of his merchandise, the passerby would like as not display an article purchased from Fianosther and go his way.

On the third day of the fair Cugel had disposed of only four periapts, at prices barely above the cost of the lead itself, while Fianosther was hard put to serve all his customers. Hoarse from bawling futile inducements, Cugel closed down his booth and approached Fianosther's place of trade, in order to inspect the mode of construction and the fastenings at the door.

Fianosther, observing, beckoned him to approach. "Enter, my friend, enter. How goes your trade?"

"In all candor, not too well," said Cugel. "I am both perplexed and disappointed, for my talismans are not obviously useless."

"I can resolve your perplexity," said Fianosther. "Your booth occupies the site of the old gibbet, and has absorbed unlucky essences. But I thought to notice you examining the manner in which the timbers of my booth are joined. You will obtain a better view from within, but first I must shorten the chain of the captive erb which roams the premises during the night."

"No need," said Cugel. "My interest was cursory."

"As to the disappointment you suffer," Fianosther went on, "it need not persist. Observe these shelves. You will note that my stock is seriously depleted."

Cugel acknowledged as much. "How does this concern me?"

Fianosther pointed across the way to a man wearing garments of black. This man was small, yellow of skin, bald as a stone. His eyes resembled knots in a plank; his mouth was wide and curved in grin of chronic mirth. "There stands Iucounu the Laughing Magician," said Fianosther. "In a short time he will come into my booth and attempt to buy a particular red libram, the casebook of Dibarcas Maior, who studied under Great Phandaal. My price is higher than he will pay, but he is a patient man, and will remon-

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strate for at least three hours. During this time his manse stands untenanted. It contains a vast collection of thaumaturgical artifacts, instruments, and activants, as well as curiosa, talismans, amulets and librams. I am anxious to purchase such items. Need I say more?"

"This is all very well," said Cugel, "but would Iucounu leave his manse without guard or attendant?"

Fianosther held wide his hands. "Why not? Who would dare steal from Iucounu the Laughing Magician?"

"Precisely this thought deters me," Cugel replied. "I am a man of resource, but not insensate recklessness."

"There is wealth to be gained," stated Fianosther. "Dazzles and displays, marvels beyond worth, as well as charms, puissances, and elixirs. But remember, I urge nothing, I counsel nothing; if you are apprehended, you have only heard me exclaiming at the wealth of Iucounu the Laughing Magician! But here he comes. Quick: turn your back so that he may not see your face. Three hours he will be here, so much I guarantee!"

Iucounu entered the booth, and Cugel bent to examine a bottle containing a pickled homunculus.

"Greetings, Iucounu!" called Fianosther. "Why have you delayed? I have refused munificent offers for a certain red libram, all on your account! And here—note this casket! It was found in a crypt near the site of old Karkod. It is yet sealed and who knows what wonder it may contain? My price is a modest twelve thousand terces."

"Interesting," murmured Iucounu. "The inscription—let me see . . . Hmm. Yes, it is authentic. The casket contains calcined fishbone, which was used throughout Grand Motholam as a purgative. It is worth perhaps ten or twelve terces as a curio. I own caskets aeons older, dating back to the Age of Glow."

Cugel sauntered to the door, gained the street, where he paced back and forth, considering every detail of the proposal as explicated by Fianosther. Superficially the matter seemed reasonable: here was Iucounu; there was the manse, bulging with encompassed wealth. Certainly no harm could result from simple reconnaisance. Cugel set off eastward along the banks of the Xzan.

The twisted turrets of green glass rose against the dark blue sky, scarlet sunlight engaging itself in the volutes. Cugel paused, made a careful appraisal of the countryside. The Xzan flowed past without a sound. Nearby, half-concealed among black poplars, pale green larch, drooping pall-willow, was a village—a dozen stone huts inhabited by barge-men and tillers of the river terraces:

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folk engrossed in their own concerns.

Cugel studied the approach to the manse: a winding way paved with dark brown tile. Finally he decided that the more frank his approach the less complex need be his explanations, if such were demanded. He began the climb up the hillside, and Iucounu's manse reared above him. Gaining the courtyard, he paused to search the landscape. Across the river, hills rolled away into the dimness, as far as the eye could reach.

Cugel marched briskly to the door, rapped, but evoked no response. He considered. If Iucounu, like Fianosther, maintained a guardian beast, it might be tempted to utter a sound if provoked. Cugel called out in various tones: growling, mewing, yammering.

Silence within.

He walked gingerly to a window, peered into a hall draped in pale gray, containing only a tabouret on which, under a glass bell jar, lay a dead rodent. Cugel circled the manse, investigating each window as he came to it, and finally reached the great hall of the ancient castle. Nimbly he climbed the rough stones, leapt across to one of Iucounu's fanciful parapets and in a trice had gained access to the manse.

He stood in a bed chamber. On a dais six gargoyles supporting a couch turned heads to glare at the intrusion. With two stealthy strides Cugel gained the arch which opened into an outer chamber. Here the walls were green and the furnishings black and pink. He left the room for a balcony circling a central chamber, light streaming through oriels high in the walls. Below were cases, chests, shelves and racks containing all manner of objects: Iucounu's marvelous collection.

Cugel stood poised, tense as a bird, but the quality of the silence reassured him: the silence of an empty place. Still, he trespassed upon the property of Iucounu the Laughing Magician, and vigilance was appropriate.

Cugel strode down a sweep of circular stairs into a great hall. He stood enthralled, paying Iucounu the tribute of unstinted wonder. But his time was limited; he must rob swiftly and be on his way. Out came his sack; he roved the hall, fastidiously selecting those objects of small bulk and great value: a small pot with antlers, which emitted clouds of remarkable gases when the prongs were tweaked; an ivory horn through which sounded voices from the past; a small stage where costumed imps stood ready to perform comic antics; an object like a cluster of crystal grapes, each affording a blurred view into one of the demon-worlds; a baton sprouting sweetmeats of assorted flavor; an ancient ring engraved with runes; a black stone sur-

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rounded by nine zones of impalpable color. He passed by hundreds of jars of powders and liquids, likewise forebore from the vessels containing preserved heads. Now he came to shelves stacked with volumes, folios and librams, where he selected with care, taking for preference those bound in purple velvet, Phandaal's characteristic color. He likewise selected folios of drawings and ancient maps, and the disturbed leather exuded a musty odor.

He circled back to the front of the hall past a case displaying a score of small metal chests, sealed with corroded bands of great age. Cugel selected three at random; they were unwontedly heavy. He passed by several massive engines whose purpose he would have liked to explore, but time was advancing, and best he should be on his way, back to Azenomei and the booth of Fianosther . . . Cugel frowned . . . In many respects the prospect seemed impractical. Fianosther would hardly choose to pay full value for his goods, or, more accurately, Iucounu's goods. It might be well to bury a certain proportion of the loot in an isolated place . . . Here was an alcove Cugel had not previously noted. A soft light welled like water against the crystal pane, which separated alcove from hall. A niche to the rear displayed a complicated object of great charm. As best as Cugel could distinguish, it seemed a miniature carrousel on which rode a dozen beautiful dolls of seeming vitality. The object was clearly of great value, and Cugel was pleased to find an aperture in the crystal pane. He stepped through, but two feet before him a second pane blocked his way, establishing an avenue which evidently led to the magic whirligig. Cugel proceeded confidently, only to be stopped by another pane which he had not seen until he bumped into it. Cugel retraced his steps and to his gratification found the doubtlessly correct entrance a few feet back. But this new avenue led him by several right angles to another blank pane. Cugel decided to forego acquisition of the carrousel and depart the castle. He turned, but discovered himself to be a trifle confused. He had come from his left—or was it his right? . . . Cugel was still seeking egress when in due course Iucounu returned to his manse.

Pausing by the alcove Iucounu gave Cugel a stare of humorous astonishment. "What have we here? A visitor? And I have been so remiss as to keep you waiting! Still, I see you have amused yourself, and I need feel no mortification." Iucounu permitted a chuckle to escape his lips. He then pretended to notice Cugel's bag. "What is this? You have brought objects for my examination? Excellent! I am always anxious to enhance my collection, in order to keep pace

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with the attrition of the years. You would be astounded to learn of the rogues who seek to despoil me! That merchant of clap-trap in his tawdry little booth, for instance—you could not conceive his frantic efforts in this regard! I tolerate him because to date he has not been bold enough to venture himself into my manse. But come, step out here into the hall, and we will examine the contents of your bag."

Cugel bowed graciously. "Gladly. As you assume, I have indeed been waiting for your return. If I recall correctly, the exit is by this passage . . ." He stepped forward, but again was halted. He made a gesture of rueful amusement. "I seem to have taken a wrong turning."

"Apparently so," said Iucounu. "Glancing upward, you will notice a decorative motif upon the ceiling. If you heed the flexion of the lunules you will be guided to the hall."

"Of course!" And Cugel briskly stepped forward in accordance with the directions.

"One moment!" called Iucounu. "You have forgotten your sack!"

Cugel reluctantly returned for the sack, once more set forth, and presently emerged into the hall.

Iucounu made a suave gesture. "If you will step this way I will be glad to examine your merchandise."

Cugel glanced reflectively along the corridor toward the front entrance. "It would be a presumption upon your patience. My little knick-knacks are below notice. With your permission I will take my leave."

"By no means!" declared Iucounu heartily. "I have few visitors, most of whom are rogues and thieves. I handle them severely, I assure you! I insist that you at least take some refreshment. Place your bag on the floor."

Cugel carefully set down the bag. "Recently I was instructed in a small competence by a sea-hag of White Alster. I believe you will be interested. I require several ells of stout cord."

"You excite my curiosity!" Iucounu extended his arm; a panel in the wainscoting slid back; a coil of rope was tossed to his hand. Rubbing his face as if to conceal a smile, Iucounu handed the rope to Cugel who shook it out with great care. "I will ask your cooperation," said Cugel. "A small matter of extending one arm and one leg."

"Yes, of course." Iucounu held out his hand, pointed a finger. The rope coiled around Cugel's arms and legs, pinning him so that he was unable to move. Iucounu's grin nearly split his great soft head. "This is a surprising development! By error I called forth Thief-taker! For your own comfort, do not strain, as Thief-taker is woven of wasp-legs. Now then,

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I will examine the contents of your bag." He peered into Cugel's sack and emitted a soft cry of dismay. "You have rifled my collection! I note certain of my most treasured valuables!"

Cugel grimaced. "Naturally! But I am no thief; Fianosther sent me here to collect certain objects, and therefore—"

Iucounu held up his hand. "The offense is far too serious for flippant disclaimers. I have stated my abhorrence for plunderers and thieves, and now I must visit upon you justice in its most unmitigated rigor—unless, of course, you can suggest an adequate requital."

"Some such requital surely exists," Cugel averred. "This cord however rasps upon my skin, so that I find cogitation impossible."

"No matter. I have decided to apply the Charm of Forlorn Encystment, which constricts the subject in a pore some forty-five miles below the surface of the earth."

Cugel blinked in dismay. "Under these conditions, requital could never be made."

"True," mused Iucounu. "I wonder if after all there is some small service which you can perform for me."

"The villain is as good as dead!" declared Cugel. "Now remove these abominable bonds!"

"I had no specific assassination in mind," said Iucounu. "Come."

The rope relaxed, allowing Cugel to hobble after Iucounu into a side chamber hung with intricately embroidered tapestry. From a cabinet Iucounu brought a small case and laid it on a floating disk of glass. He opened the case, gestured to Cugel, who perceived that the box showed two indentations lined with scarlet fur, where reposed a single small hemisphere of filmed violet glass.

"As a knowledgeable and traveled man," suggested Iucounu, "you doubtless recognize this object. No? You are familiar, of course, with the Cutz Wars of the Eighteenth Aeon? No?" Iucounu hunched up his shoulders in astonishment. "During these ferocious events the demon Unda-Hrada—he listed as 16-04 Green in Thrump's Almanac—thought to assist his principals, and to this end thrust certain agencies up from the sub-world La-Er. In order that they might perceive, they were tipped with cusps similar to the one you see before you. When events went amiss, the demon snatched himself back to La-Er. The hemispheres were dislodged and broadcast across Cutz. One of these, as you see, I own. You must procure its mate and bring it to me, whereupon your trespass shall be overlooked."

Cugel reflected. "The choice, if it lies between a sortie into the demon-world La-Er and the Spell of Forlorn Encystment, is moot. I am at a loss for decision."

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Iucounu's laugh almost split the big yellow bladder of his head. "A visit to La-Er perhaps will prove unnecessary. You may secure the article in that land once known as Cutz."

"If I must, I must," growled Cugel, thoroughly displeased by the manner in which the day's work had ended. "Who guards this violet hemisphere? What is its function? How do I go and how return? What necessary weapons, talismans and other magical adjuncts do you undertake to fit me out with?"

"All in good time," said Iucounu. "First I must ensure that, once at liberty, you conduct yourself with unremitting loyalty, zeal and singleness of purpose."

"Have no fear," declared Cugel, "my word is my bond."

"Excellent!" cried Iucounu. "This knowledge represents a basic security which I do not in the least take lightly. The act now to be performed is doubtless supererogatory."

He departed the chamber and after a moment returned with a covered glass bowl containing a small white creature, all claws, prongs, barbs and hooks, now squirming angrily. "This," said Iucounu, "is my friend Firx, from the star Achernar, who is far wiser than he seems. Firx is annoyed at being separated from his comrade with whom he shares a vat in my work-room. He will assist you in the expeditious discharge of your duties." Iucounu stepped close, deftly thrust the creature against Cugel's abdomen. It merged into his viscera, took up a vigilant post clasped around Cugel's liver.

Iucounu stood back, laughing in that immoderate glee which had earned him his cognomen. Cugel's eyes bulged from his head. He opened his mouth to utter an objurgation, but instead clenched his jaw, rolled up his eyes.

The rope uncoiled itself. Cugel stood quivering, every muscle knotted.

Iucounu's mirth dwindled to a thoughtful grin. "You spoke of magical adjuncts. What of those talismans whose efficacy you proclaimed from your booth in Azenomei? Will they not immobilize enemies, dissolve iron, impassion virgins, confer immortality?"

"These talismans are not uniformly dependable," said Cugel. "I will require further competences."

"You have them," said Iucounu, "in your sword, your crafty persuasiveness and the agility of your feet. Still, you have aroused my concern and I will help you to this extent." He hung a small square tablet about Cugel's neck. "You now may put aside all fear of starvation. A touch of this potent object will induce nutriment into wood, bark, grass, even discarded clothing. It will also sound

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a chime in the presence of poison. So now—there is nothing to delay us! Come, we will go. Rope? Where is Rope?"

Obediently the rope looped around Cugel's neck, and Cugel was forced to march along behind Iucounu.

They came out upon the roof of the antique castle. Darkness had long since fallen over the land. Up and down the valley of the Xzan faint lights glimmered while the Xzan itself was an irregular width darker than dark.

Iucounu pointed to a cage. "This will be your conveyance. Inside."

Cugel hesitated. "It might be preferable to dine well, to sleep and rest, to set forth tomorrow refreshed."

"What?" spoke Iucounu in a voice like a horn. "You dare stand before me and state preferences? You, who came skulking into my house, pillaged my valuables and left all in disarray? Do you understand your luck? Perhaps you prefer the Forlorn Encystment?"

"By no means!" protested Cugel nervously. "I am anxious only for the success of the venture!"

"Into the cage then."

Cugel turned despairing eyes around the castle roof, slowly went to the cage and stepped within.

"I trust you suffer no deficiency of memory," said Iucounu. "But even if this becomes the case, and if you neglect your prime responsibility, which is to say, the procuring of the violet cusp, Firx is on hand to remind you."

Cugel said, "Since I am now committed to this enterprise, and unlikely to return, you may care to learn my appraisal of yourself and your character. In the first place—"

But Iucounu held up his hand. "I do not care to listen; obloquy injures my self-esteem and I am skeptical of praise. So now—be off!" He drew back, stared up into the darkness, then shouted that invocation known as Thasdrubal's Laganetic Transfer. From high came a thud and a buffet, a muffled bellow of rage.

Iucounu retreated a few steps, shouted up words in an archaic language; and the cage with Cugel crouching within was snatched aloft and hurled through the air.

Cold wind bit Cugel's face. From above came a flapping and creaking of vast wings and dismal lamentation; the cage swung back and forth. Below all was dark; a blackness like a pit. By the disposition of the stars Cugel perceived that the course was to the north, and presently he sensed the thrust of the Maurenron Mounains below; and then they flew over that wilderness known as the Land of the Falling Wall. Once or twice Cugel glimpsed the lights of an isolated castle, and once he noted a great bonfire. For a period a winged sprite came to fly along-

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side the cage and peer within. It seemed to find Cugel's plight amusing, and when Cugel sought information as to the land below, it merely uttered raucous cries of mirth. It became fatigued and sought to cling to the cage but Cugel kicked it away, and it fell off into the wind with a scream of envy.

The east flushed the red of old blood, and presently the sun appeared, trembling like an old man with a chill. The ground was shrouded by mist; Cugel was barely able to see that they crossed land of black mountains and dark chasms. Presently the mist parted once more to reveal a leaden sea. Once or twice he peered up but the roof of the cage concealed the demon except for the tips of the leathern wings.

At last the demon reached the north shore of the ocean. Swooping to the beach it vented a vindictive croak, and allowed the cage to fall from a height of fifteen feet.

Cugel crawled from the broken cage. Nursing his bruises he called a curse after the departing demon, then plodded back through sand and dank yellow spinifex, and climbed the slope of the foreshore. To the north were marshy barrens and a far huddle of low hills; to east and west ocean and dreary beach. Cugel shook his fist to the south. Somehow, at some time, in some manner, he would visit revenge upon the Laughing Magician! So much he vowed.

A few hundred yards to the west was the trace of an ancient seawall. Cugel thought to inspect it, but hardly moved three steps before Firx clamped prongs into his liver. Cugel, rolling up his eyes in agony, reversed his direction and set out along the shore to the east.

Presently he hungered, and bethought himself of the charm furnished by Iucounu. He picked up a piece of driftwood and rubbed it with the tablet, hoping to see a transformation into a tray of sweetmeats or a roast fowl. But the driftwood merely softened to the texture of cheese, retaining the flavor of driftwood. Cugel ate with snaps and gulps. Another score against Iucounu! How the Laughing Magician would pay!

The scarlet globe of the sun slid across the southern sky. Night approached, and at last Cugel came upon human habitation: a rude village beside a small river. The huts were like bird's-nests of mud and sticks, and smelled vilely of ordure and filth. Among them wandered a people as unlovely and graceless as the huts. They were squat, brutish and obese; their hair was a coarse yellow tangle; their features were lumps. Their single noteworthy attribute—one in which Cugel took an instant and keen interest—was their eyes: blind-seeming violet hemi-

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spheres, similar in every respect to that object required by Iucounu.

Cugel approached the village cautiously but the inhabitants took small interest in him. If the hemisphere coveted by Iucounu were identical to the violet eyes of these folk, then a basic uncertainty of the mission was resolved, and procuring the violet cusp became merely a matter of tactics.

Cugel paused to observe the villagers, and found much to puzzle him. In the first place they carried themselves not as the ill-smelling loons they were, but with a remarkable loftiness and a dignity which verged at times upon hauteur. Cugel watched in puzzlement: were they a tribe of dotards? In any event they seemed to pose no threat, and he advanced into the main avenue of the village, walking gingerly to avoid the more noxious heaps of refuse. One of the villagers now deigned to notice him, and addressed him in grunting guttural voice. "Well sirrah: what is your wish? Why do you prowl the outskirts of our city Smolod?"

"I am a wayfarer," said Cugel. "I ask only to be directed to the inn, where I may find food and lodging."

"We have no inn; travelers and wayfarers are unknown to us. Still, you are welcome to share our plenty. Yonder is a manse with appointments sufficient for your comfort." The man pointed to a dilapidated hut. "You may eat as you will; merely enter the refectory yonder and select what you wish; there is no stinting at Smolod."

"I thank you gratefully," said Cugel, and would have spoken further except that his host had strolled away.

Cugel gingerly looked into the shed, and after some exertion cleaned out the most inconvenient debris, and arranged a trestle on which to sleep. The sun was now at the horizon and Cugel went to that store-room which had been identified as the refectory. The villager's description of the bounty available, as Cugel had suspected, was in the nature of hyperbole. To one side of the store-room was a heap of smoked fish; to the other a bin containing lentils mingled with various seeds and cereals. Cugel took a portion to his hut, where he made a glum supper.

The sun had set; Cugel went forth to see what the village offered in the way of entertainment, but found the streets deserted. In certain of the huts lamps burned, and Cugel peering through the cracks saw the residents dining upon smoked fish or engaged in discourse. He returned to his shed, built a small fire against the chill and composed himself for sleep.

The following day Cugel renewed his observation of the village Smolod and its violet-eyed folk. None, he noticed, went forth to work, nor did there seem to be

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fields near at hand. The discovery caused Cugel dissatisfaction. In order to secure one of the violet eyes, he would be obliged to kill its owner, and for this purpose freedom from officious interference was essential.

He made tentative attempts at conversation among the villagers, but they looked at him in a manner which presently began to jar at Cugel's equanimity: it was almost as if they were gracious lords and he the ill-smelling lout!

During the afternoon he strolled south, and about a mile along the shore came upon another village. The people were much like the inhabitants of Smolod, but with ordinary-seeming eyes. They were likewise industrious; Cugel watched them till fields and fish the ocean.

He approached a pair of fishermen, on their way back to the village, their catch slung over their shoulders. They stopped, eyed Cugel with no great friendliness. Cugel introduced himself as a wayfarer and asked concerning the lands to the east, but the fishermen professed ignorance other than the fact that the land was barren, dreary and dangerous.

"I am currently guest at the village Smolod," said Cugel. "I find the folk pleasant enough, but somewhat odd. For instance, why are their eyes as they are? What is the nature of their affliction? Why do they conduct themselves with such aristocratic self-assurance and suavity of manner?"

"The eyes are magic cusps," stated the older of the fishermen in a grudging voice. "They afford a view of the Overworld; why should not the owners behave as lords? So will I when Radkuth Vomin dies, for I inherit his eyes."

"Indeed!" explained Cugel, marveling. "Can these magic cusps be detached at will and transfered as the owner sees fit?"

"They can, but who would exchange the Overworld for this?" The fisherman swung his arm around the dreary landscape. "I have toiled long and at last it is my turn to taste the delights of the Overworld. After this there is nothing, and the only peril is death through a surfeit of bliss."

"Vastly interesting!" remarked Cugel. "How might I qualify for a pair of these magic cusps?"

"Strive as do all the others of Grodz: place your name on the list, then toil to supply the lords of Smolod with sustenance. Thirty-one years have I sown and reaped lentils and emmer and netted fish and dried them over slow fires, and now the name of Bubach Angh is at the head of the list, and you must do the same."

"Thirty-one years," mused Cugel. "A period of not negligible duration." And Firx squirmed restlessly causing Cugel's liver no small discomfort.

The fishermen proceeded to

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their village Grodz; Cugel returned to Smolod. Here he sought out that man to whom he had spoken upon his arrival to the village. "My lord," said Cugel, "as you know I am a traveler from a far land, attracted here by the magnificence of the city Smolod."

"Understandable," grunted the other. "Our splendor cannot help but inspire emulation."

"What then is the source of the magic cusps?"

The elder turned the violet hemispheres upon Cugel as if seeing him for the first time. He spoke in a surly voice. "It is a matter we do not care to dwell upon, but there is no harm in it, now that the subject has been broached. At a remote time the demon Underherd sent up tentacles to look across Earth, each tipped with a cusp. Simbilis the Sixteenth pained the monster, which jerked back to his sub-world and the cusps became dislodged. Four hundred and twelve of the cusps were gathered and brought to Smolod, then as splendid as now it appears to me. Yes, I realize that I see but a semblance, but so do you, and who is to say which is real?"

"I do not look through magic cusps," said Cugel.

"True." The elder shrugged. "It is a matter I prefer to overlook. I dimly recall that I inhabit a stye and devour the coarsest of food—but the subjective reality is that I inhabit a glorious palace and dine on splendid viands among the princes and princesses who are my peers. It is explained thus: the demon Underherd looked from the sub-world to this one; we look from this to the Overworld, which is the quintessence of human hope, visionary longing, and beatific dream. We who inhabit this world—how can we think of ourselves as other than splendid lords? This is how we are."

"It is inspiring!" exclaimed Cugel. "How may I obtain a pair of these magic cusps?"

"There are two methods. Underherd lost four hundred and fourteen cusps, we control four hundred and twelve. Two were never found, and evidenly lie on the floor of the ocean's deep. You are at liberty to secure these. The second means is to become a citizen of Grodz, and furnish the lords of Smolod with sustenance till one of us dies, as we do infrequently."

"I understand that a certain Lord Radkuth Vomin is ailing."

"Yes, that is he." The elder indicated a pot-bellied old man with a slack drooling mouth, sitting in filth before his hut. "You see him at his ease in the pleasaunce of his palace. Lord Radkuth strained himself with a surfeit of lust, for our princesses are the most ravishing creations of human inspiration, just as I am the noblest of princes. But Lord Radkuth indulged himself too copiously, and thereby suffered a mortification."

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"Perhaps I might make special arrangements to secure his cusps?" ventured Cugel.

"I fear not. You must go to Grodz and toil as do the others. As did I, in a former existence which now seems dim and inchoate . . . To think I suffered so long! But you are young; thirty or forty or fifty years is not too long a time to wait."

Cugel put his hand to his abdomen to quiet the fretful stirrings of Firx. "In the space of so much time, the sun may well have waned. Look!" He pointed as a black flicker crossed the face of the sun and seemed to leave a momentary crust. "Even now it ebbs!"

"You are over-apprehensive," stated the elder. "To us who are lords of Smolod, the sun puts forth a radiance of exquisite colors."

"This may well be true at the moment," said Cugel, "but when the sun goes dark, what then? Will you take an equal delight in the gloom and the chill?"

But the elder no longer attended him. Radkuth Vomin had fallen sideways into the mud, and appeared to be dead.

Toying indecisively with his knife Cugel went to look down at the corpse. A deft cut or two—no more than the work of a moment—and he would have achieved his goal. He swayed forward, but already the fugitive moment had passed. Other lords of the village had approached to jostle Cugel aside; Radkuth Vomin was lifted and carried with the most solemn nicety into the ill-smelling precints of his hut.

Cugel stared wistfully through the doorway, calculating the chances of this ruse and that.

"Let lamps be brought!" intoned the elder. "Let a final effulgence surround Lord Radkuth on his gem-encrusted bier! Let the golden clarion sound from the towers; let the princesses don robes of samite; let their tresses obscure the faces of delight Lord Radkuth loved so well! And now we must keep vigil! Who will guard the bier?"

Cugel stepped forward. "I would deem it honor indeed."

The elder shook his head. "This is a privilege reserved for his peers. Lord Maulfag, Lord Glus: perhaps you will act in this capacity." Two of the villagers approached the bench on which Lord Radkuth Vomin lay.

"Next," declared the elder, "the obsequies must be proclaimed, and the magic cusps transferred to Eubach Angh that most deserving squire of Grodz. Who, again, will go to notify this squire?"

"Again," said Cugel, "I offer my services, if only to requite in some small manner the hospitality I have enjoyed at Smolod."

"Well spoken!" intoned the elder. "So, then, at speed to Grodz; return with that squire who by his faith deserves advancement."

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Cugel bowed, ran off across the barrens toward Grodz. As he approached the outermost fields he moved cautiously, skulking from tussock to copse, and presently found that which he sought: a peasant turning the dank soil with a mattock.

Cugel crept quietly forward, struck down the loon with a gnarled root. He stripped off the bast garments, the leather hat, the leggings and foot-gear; with his knife he hacked off the stiff straw-colored beard. Taking all and leaving the peasant lying dazed and naked in the mud he fled on long strides back toward Smolod. In a secluded spot he dressed himself in the golden garments. He examined the hacked-off beard with some perplexity, and finally, by tying up tufts of the coarse yellow hair and tying tuft to tuft, contrived to bind enough together to make a straggling false beard for himself. That hair which remained he tucked up under the brim of the flapping leather hat.

Now the sun had set; plum-colored gloom obscured the land. Cugel returned to Smolod. Oil lamps flickered before the hut of Radkuth Vomin, where the obese and misshapen village women wailed and groaned.

Cugel stepped cautiously forward, wondering what might be expected of him. As for his disguise: it would either prove effective or it would not. To what extent the violet cusps befuddled perception was a matter of doubt; he could only hazard a trial.

Cugel marched boldly up to the door of the hut. Pitching his voice as low as possible, he called, "I am here, revered princes of Smolod: Squire Bubach Angh of Grodz who for thirty-one years has heaped the choicest of delicacies into the Smolod larders. Now I appear, beseeching elevation to the estate of nobility."

"As is your right," said the Chief Elder. "But you seem a man different to that Bubach Angh who so long has served the princes of Smolod."

"I have been transfigured—through grief at the passing of Prince Radkuth Vomin and through rapture at the prospect of elevation."

"This is clear and understandable. Come then, prepare yourself for the rites."

"I am ready as of this instant," said Cugel. "Indeed, if you will but tender me the magic cusps I will take them quietly aside and rejoice."

The Chief Elder shook his head indulgently. "This is not in accord with the rites. To begin with you must stand naked here on the pavilion of this mighty castle, and the fairest of the fair will anoint you in aromatics. Then comes the invocation to Eddith Bran Maur. And then—"

"Revered," stated Cugel, "allow

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me one boon. Before the ceremonies begin, fit me with the magic cusps so that I may understand the full portent of the ceremony."

The Chief Elder considered. "The request is unorthodox, but reasonable. Bring forth the cusps!"

There was a wait, during which Cugel stood first on one foot then the other. The minutes dragged; the garments and the false beard itched intolerably. And now at the outskirts of the village he saw the approach of several new figures, coming from the direction of Grodz. One was almost certainly Bubach Angh, while another seemed to have been shorn of his beard.

The Chief Elder appeared, holding in each hand a violet cusp. "Step forward!"

Cugel called loudly. "I am here, sir."

"I now apply the potion which sanctifies the junction of magic cusp to right eye."

At the back of the crowd Bubach Angh raised his voice. "Hold! What transpires?"

Cugel turned, pointed. "What jackal is this that interrupts solemnities? Remove him: hence!"

"Indeed!" called the Chief Elder peremptorily. "You demean yourself and the dignity of the ceremony."

Bubach Angh crouched back, momentarily cowed.

"In view of the interruption," said Cugel, "I had as lief merely take custody of the magic cusps until these louts can properly be chastened."

"No," said the Chief Elder. "Such a procedure is impossible." He shook drops of rancid fat in Cugel's right eye. But now the peasant of the shorn beard set up an outcry: "My hat! My blouse! My beard! Is there no justice?"

"Silence!" hissed the crowd. "This is a solemn occasion!"

"But I am Bu—"

Cugel called, "Insert the magic cusp, lord; let us ignore these louts."

"A lout, you call me?" roared Bubach Angh. "I recognize you you rogue. Hold up proceedings!"

The Chief Elder said inexorably, "I now invest you with the right cusp. You must temporarily hold this eye closed to prevent a discord which would strain the brain, and cause stupor. Now the left eye." He stepped forward with the ointment, but Bubach Angh and the beardless peasant no longer would be denied. "Hold up proceedings! You ennoble an impostor! I am Bubach Angh, the worthy squire! He who stands before you is a vagabond!"

The Chief Elder inspected Bubach Angh with puzzlement. "For a fact you resemble that peasant who for thirty-one years has carted supplies to Smelod. But if you are Bubach Angh, who is this?"

The beardless peasant lumbered

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forward. "It is the soulless wretch who stole the clothes from my back and the beard from my face."

"He is a criminal, a bandit, a vagabond—"

"Hold!" called the Chief Elder. "The words are ill-chosen. Remember that he has been exalted to the rank of prince of Smolod."

"Not altogether!" cried Bubach Angh. "He has one of my eyes. I demand the other!"

"An awkward situation," muttered the Chief Elder. He spoke to Cugel, "Though formerly a vagabond and cutthroat, you are now a prince, and a man of responsibility. What is your opinion?"

"I suggest a hiding for these obstreperous louts. Then—"

Bubach Angh and the beardless peasant, uttering shouts of rage, sprang forward. Cugel, leaping away, could not control his right eye. The lid flew open; into his brain crashed such a wonder of exaltation that his breath caught in his throat and his heart almost stopped from astonishment. But concurrently his left eye showed the reality of Smolod. The dissonance was too wild to be tolerated; he stumbled and fell against a hut. Bubach Angh stood over him with mattock raised high, but now the Chief Elder stepped between. "Do you take leave of your senses? This man is a prince of Smolod!"

"A man I will kill, for he has my eye! Do I toil thirty-one years for the benefit of a vagabond?"

"Calm yourself, Bubach Angh, if that be your name, and remember the issue is not yet entirely clear. Possibly an error has been made—undoubtedly an honest error, for this man is now a prince of Smolod, which is to say, justice and sagacity personified."

"He was not that before he received the cusp," argued Bubach Angh, "which is when the offense was committed."

"I cannot occupy myself with casuistic distinctions," replied the elder. "In any event, your name heads the list and on the next fatality—"

"Ten or twelve years hence?" cried Bubach Angh. "Must I toil yet longer, and receive my reward just as the sun goes dark? No, no, this cannot be!"

The beardless peasant made a suggestion, "Take the other cusp. In this way you will have at least half of your rights, and so prevent the interloper from cheating you totally."

Bubach Angh agreed. "I will start with my one magic cusp; I will then kill that knave and take the other, and all will be well."

"Now then," said the Chief Elder haughtily, "this is hardly the tone to take in reference to a prince of Smolod!"

"Bah!" snorted Bubach Angh. "Remember the source of your viands! We of Grodz will not toil to no avail."

"Very well," said the Chief El-

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der. "I deplore your uncouth bluster, but I cannot deny that you have a measure of reason on your side. Here is the left cusp of Radkuth Vomin. I will dispense with the invocation, anointment and the congratulatory paean. If you will be good enough to step forward and open your left eye—so."

As Cugel had done, Bubach Angh looked through both eyes together and staggered back in a daze. But clapping his hand to his left eye he recovered himself, and advanced upon Cugel. "You now must see the futility of your trick. Extend me that cusp and go your way, for you will never have the use of the two."

"It matters very little," said Cugel. "Thanks to my friend Firx I am well content with the one."

Bubach Angh ground his teeth. "Do you think to trick me again? Your life has approached its end: not just I but all Grodz goes warrant for this!"

"Not in the precincts of Smolod!" warned the Chief Elder. "There must be no quarrels among the princes: I decree amity! You who have shared the cusps of Radkuth Vomin must also share his palace, his robes, appurtenances, jewels and retinue, until that hopefully remote occasion when one or the other dies, whereupon the survivor shall take all. This is my judgment, there is no more to be said."

"The moment of the interloper's death is hopefully near at hand," rumbled Bubach Angh. "The instant he sets foot from Smolod will be his last! The citizens of Grodz will maintain a vigil of a hundred years, if necessary!"

Firx squirmed at this news and Cugel winced at the discomfort. In a conciliatory voice he addressed Bubach Angh. "A compromise might be arranged: to you shall go the entirety of Radkuth Vomin's estate: his palace, appurtenences, retinue. To me shall devolve only the magic cusps."

But Bubach Angh would have none of it. "If you value your life, deliver that cusp to me this moment."

"This cannot be done," said Cugel.

Bubach Angh turned away, spoke to the beardless peasant, who nodded and departed. Bubach Angh glowered at Cugel, then went to Radkuth Vomin's hut and sat on the heap of rubble before the door. Here he experimented with his new cusp, cautiously closing his right eye, opening the left to stare in wonder at the Overworld. Cugel thought to take advantage of his absorption and sauntered off toward the edge of town. Bubach Angh appeared not to notice. Ha! thought Cugel. It was to be so easy then! Two more strides and he would be lost into the darkness! Jauntily he stretched his long legs to take those two strides. A slight sound—

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a grunt, a scrape, a rustle of clothes caused him to jerk aside; down swung a mattock blade, cutting the air where his head had been. In the faint glow cast by the Smolod lamps Cugel glimpsed the beardless peasant's vindictive countenance. Behind him Bubach Angh came loping, heavy head thrust forward like a bull. Cugel dodged, ran with agility back into the heart of Smolod. Slowly and in vast disappointment Bubach Angh returned, to seat himself once more. "You will never escape," he told Cugel. "Give over the cusp and preserve your life!"

"By no means," replied Cugel with spirit. "Rather fear for your own sodden vitality, which goes in even greater peril!"

From the hut of the Chief Elder came an admonitory call. "Cease the bickering! I am indulging the exotic whims of a beautiful princess and must not be distracted."

Cugel, recalling the oleaginous wads of flesh, the leering slab-sided visages, the matted verminous hair, the wattles and wens, the evil odors, which characterized the women of Smolod, marveled anew at the power of the cusps. Bubach Angh was once more testing the vision of his left eye. Cugel composed himself on a bench and attempted the use of his right eye, first holding his hand before his left . . .

Cugel wore a shirt of supple silver scales, tight scarlet trousers, a dark blue cloak. He sat on a marble bench before a row of spiral marble columns overgrown with dark foliage and white flowers. To either side the palaces of Smolod towered into the night, one behind the other, with soft lights accenting the arches and windows. The sky was a soft dark blue, hung with great glowing stars; among the palaces were gardens of cypress, myrtle, jasmine, sphade, thyssam; the air was pervaded with the perfume of flowers and flowing water. From somewhere came a wisp of music: a murmur of soft chords, a sigh of melody. Cugel took a deep breath, rose to his feet. He stepped forward, moved across the terrace. Palaces and gardens shifted perspective; on a dim lawn three girls in gowns of white gauze watched him over their shoulders.

Cugel took an involuntary step forward, then, recalling the malice of Bubach Angh, paused to check on his whereabouts. Across the plaza rose a palace of seven stories, each level with its terrace garden, with vines and flowers trailing down the walls. Through the windows Cugel glimpsed rich furnishings, lustrous chandeliers, the soft movement of liveried chamberlains. On the pavilion before the palace stood a hawk-featured man with a cropped golden beard in robes of ocher and black, with gold epaulettes and black buskins. He stood one foot on a

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stone griffin, arms on bent knee, gazing toward Cugel with an expression of brooding dislike. Cugel marveled: could this be the pig-faced Bubach Angh? Could the magnificent seven-tiered palace be the hovel of Radkuth Vomin?

Cugel moved slowly off across the plaza, and now came upon a pavilion lit by candelabra. Tables supported meats, jellies, pastries of every description, and Cugel's belly, nourished only by driftwood and smoked fish, urged him forward. He passed from table to table, sampling morsels from every dish, and found all to be of the highest quality.

"Smoke fish and lentils I may still be devouring," Cugel told himself, "but there is much to be said for the enchantment by which they become such exquisite delicacies. Indeed a man might do far worse than spend the rest of his life here in Smolod."

Almost as if Firx had been anticipating the thought, he instantly inflicted upon Cugel's liver a series of agonizing pangs, and Cugel bitterly reviled Iucounu the Laughing Magician and repeated his vows of vengeance.

Recovering his composure, he sauntered to that area where the formal gardens surrounding the palaces gave way to parkland. He looked over his shoulder to find the hawk-faced prince in ocher and black approaching, with manifestly hostile intent. In the dimness of the park Cugel noted other movement and thought to spy a number of armoured warriors.

Cugel returned to the plaza and Bubach Angh followed, once more to stand glowering at Cugel in front of Radkuth Vomin's palace.

"Clearly," said Cugel aloud, for the benefit of Firx, "there will be no departure from Smolod tonight. Naturally I am anxious to convey the cusp to Iucounu, but if I am killed then neither the cusp nor the admirable Firx will ever return to Almery."

Firx made no further demonstration. Now, thought Cugel, where to pass the night? The seven-tiered palace of Radkuth Vomin manifestly offered ample and spacious accomodation for both himself and Bubach Angh. In essence however, the two would be crammed together in a one-roomed hut, with a single heap of damp reeds for a couch. Thoughtfully, regretfully, Cugel closed his right eye, opened his left.

Smolod was as before. The surly Bubach Angh crouched before the door to Radkuth Vomin's hut. Cugel stepped forward, kicked Bubach Angh smartly. In surprise and shock, both Bubach Angh's eyes opened, and the rival impulses colliding in his brain induced paralysis. Back in the darkness the beardless peasant roared and came charging forward, mattock on high, and Cugel relin-

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quished his plan to cut Bubach Angh's throat. He skipped inside the hut and barred the door.

He now closed his left eye, opened his right. He found himself in the magnificent entry hall of Radkuth Vomin's palace, the portico of which was secured by a portcullis of forged iron. Without, the golden-haired prince in ocher and black, holding his hand over one eye, was lifting himself in cold dignity from the pavement of the plaza. Raising one arm in noble defiance Bubach Angh swung his cloak over his shoulder, marched off to join his warriors.

Cugel sauntered through the palace, inspecting the appointments with pleasure. If it were not for the importunities of Firx, there would be no haste in trying the perilous journey back to the Valley of the Xzan.

Cugel selected a luxurious chamber facing to the south, doffed his rich garments for satin nightwear, settled upon a couch with sheets of pale blue silk, and instantly fell asleep.

In the morning there was a degree of difficulty remembering which eye to open, and Cugel thought it might be well to fashion a patch to wear over that eye not currently in use.

By day the palaces of Smolod were more grand than ever, and now the plaza was thronged with princes and princesses, all of utmost beauty.

Cugel dressed himself in handsome garments of black, with a jaunty green cap and green sandals. He descended to the entry hall, raised the portcullis with a gesture of command, went forth into the plaza.

There was no sign of Bubach Angh. The other inhabitants of Smolod greeted him with courtesy and the princesses displayed noticeable warmth, as if they found him of good address. Cugel responded politely, but without fervor: not even the magic cusp could persuade him against the sour wads of fat, flesh, grime and hair which were the Smolod women."

He breakfasted on delightful viands at the pavilion, then returned to the plaza to consider his next course of action. A cursory inspection of the parklands revealed Grodz warriors on guard. There was no immediate prospect of escape.

The nobility of Smolod applied themselves to their diversions. Some wandered the meadows, others went boating upon the delightful waterways to the north. The Chief Elder, a prince of sagacious and noble visage, sat alone on an onyx bench, deep in reverie.

Cugel approached; the Chief Elder aroused himself and gave Cugel a salute of measured cordiality. "I am not easy in my mind," he declared. "In spite of all judiciousness, and allowing for your

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unavoidable ignorance of our customs, I feel a certain inequity has been done, and I am at a loss as how to repair it."

"It seems to me," said Cugel, "that Squire Bubach Angh, though doubtless a worthy man, exhibits a lack of discipline unfitting the dignity of Smolod. He would be all the better for a few years more seasoning at Grodz."

"There is something in what you say," replied the elder. "Small personal sacrifices are sometimes essential to the welfare of the group. I feel certain that you, if the issue arose, would gladly offer up your cusp and enroll anew at Grodz. What are a few years? They flutter past like butterflies."

Cugel made a suave gesture. "Or a trial by lot might be arranged, in which all who see with two cusps participate, the loser of the trial donating one of his cusps to Bubach Angh. I myself will make do with one."

The elder frowned. "Well—the contingency is remote. Meanwhile you must participate in our merrymaking. If I may say so, you cut a personable figure and certain of the princesses have been casting sheep's eyes in your direction. There, for instance, the lovely Udela Narshag—and there, Zokoxa of the Rose-Petals, and beyond the vivacious Ilviu Lasmal. You must not be backward; here in Smolod we live an uncircumscribed life."

"The charm of these ladies has not escaped me," said Cugel. "Unluckily I am bound by a vow of continence."

"Unfortunate man!" exclaimed the Chief Elder. "The princesses of Smolod are nonpareil! And notice—yet another soliciting your attention!"

"Surely it is you she summons," said Cugel, and the elder went to confer with the young woman in question, who had come riding into the plaza in a magnificent boat-shaped car which walked on six swan-feet. The princess reclined on a couch of pink down and was beautiful enough to make Cugel rue the fastidiousness of his recollection, which projected every matted hair, mole, dangling underlip, sweating seam and wrinkle of the Smolod women to the front of his memory. This princess was indeed the essence of a daydream: slender and supple, with skin like still cream, a delicate nose, lucent brooding eyes, a mouth of delightful flexibility. Her expression intrigued Cugel, for it was more complex than that of the other princesses: pensive, yet wilful; ardent yet dissatisfied.

Into the plaza came Bubach Angh, accoutered in military wise, with corselet, morion and sword. The Chief Elder went to speak to him; and now to Cugel's irritation the princess in the walking boat signaled to him.

He went forward. "Yes, prin-

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cess; you saluted me, I believe?"

The princess nodded. "I speculate on your presence up here in these northern lands." She spoke in a soft clear voice like music.

Cugel said, "I am here on a mission; I stay but a short while at Smolod, and then must continue east and south."

"Indeed!" said the princess. "What is the nature of your mission?"

"To be candid, I was brought here by the malice of a magician. It was by no means a yearning of my own."

The princess laughed softly. "I see few strangers. I long for new faces and new talk. Perhaps you will come to my palace and we will talk of magic, and the strange circumstances which throng the dying earth."

Cugel bowed stiffly. "Your offer is kind. But you must seek elsewhere; I am bound by a vow of continence. Control your displeasure, for it applies not only to you but to Udela Narshag yonder, to Zokoxa, and to Ilviu Lasmal."

The princess raised her eyebrows, sank back on her down-covered couch. She smiled faintly. "Indeed, indeed. You are a harsh man, a stern relentless man, thus to refuse yourself to so many imploring women."

"This is the case, and so it must be." Cugel turned away to face the Chief Elder who approached with Bubach Angh at his back.

"Sorry circumstances," announced the Chief Elder in a troubled voice. "Bubach Angh speaks for the village of Grodz. He declares that no more victuals will be furnished until justice is done, and this they define as the surrender of your cusp to Bubach Angh, and your person to a punitive committee who waits in the parkland yonder."

Cugel laughed uneasily. "What a distorted view! You assured them of course that we of Smolod would eat grass and destroy the cusps before agreeing to such detestable provisions?"

"I fear that I temporized," stated the Chief Elder. "I feel that the others of Smolod favor a more flexible course of action."

The implication was clear, and Firx began to stir in exasperation. In order to appraise circumstances in the most forthright manner possible, Cugel shifted the patch to look from his left eye.

Certain citizens of Grodz, armed with scythes, mattocks and clubs waited at a distance of fifty yards: evidently the punitive committee to which Bubach Angh had referred. To one side were the huts of Smolod; to the other the walking boat and the princess of such—Cugel stared in astonishment. The boat was as before, walking on six bird-legs, and sitting in the pink down was the princess, if possible, more beautiful than ever. But now her expres-

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sion, rather than faintly smiling, was cool and still.

Cugel drew a deep breath, took to his heels. Bubach Angh shouted an order to halt, but Cugel paid no heed. Across the barrens he raced, with the punitive committee in pursuit.

Cugel laughed gleefully. He was long of limb, sound of wind; the peasants were stumpy, knot-muscled, phlegmatic. He could easily run two miles to their one. He paused, turned to wave farewell. To his dismay two legs from the walking boat detached themselves, leapt after him. Cugel ran for his life. In vain. The legs came bounding past, one on either side. They swung around, kicked him to a halt.

Cugel sullenly walked back, the legs hopping behind. Just before he reached the outskirts of Smolod he reached under the patch, pulled loose the magic cusp. As the punitive committee bore down on him, he held it aloft. "Stand back! Or I break the cusp to fragments!"

"Hold! Hold!" called Bubach Angh. "This must not be! Come, give me the cusp and accept your just deserts."

"Nothing has yet been decided," Cugel reminded him. "The Chief Elder has ruled for no one."

The girl rose from her seat in the boat. "I will rule; I am Derwe Coreme, of the House of Domber. Give me the violet glass, whatever it is."

"By no means," said Cugel. "Take the cusp from Bubach Angh."

"Never!" exclaimed the squire from Grodz.

"What? You both have a cusp and both want two? What are these precious objects? You wear them as eyes? Give them to me."

Cugel drew his sword. "I prefer to run, but I fight if I must."

"I cannot run," said Bubach Angh. "I prefer to fight." He pulled the cusp from his own eye. "Now then, vagabond, prepare to die."

"A moment," said Derwe Coreme. From one of the legs of the boat thin arms reached to seize the wrists of both Cugel and Bubach Angh. The cusps fell to earth; that of Cugel was caught and conveyed to Derwe Coreme; that of Bubach Angh struck a stone and shivered to fragments. He howled in anguish, leapt upon Cugel, who gave ground before the attack.

Bubach Angh knew nothing of sword-play; he hacked and slashed as if he were cleaning fish. The fury of his attack, however, was unsettling and Cugel was hard put to defend himself. In addition to Bubach Angh's sallies and slashes, Firx was deploring the loss of the cusp.

Derwe Coreme had lost interest in the affair. The boat started off across the barrens, moving faster and ever faster. Cugel slashed out with his sword, leapt back, leapt back once more, and for the sec-

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ond time fled across the barrens, and the folk of Smolod and Grodz shouted curses after him.

The boat-car jogged along at a leisurely rate. Lungs throbbing, Cugel gained upon it, and with a great bound leapt up, caught the gunwhale, pulled himself astride.

It was as he expected. Derwe Coreme had looked through the cusp and lay back in a daze. The violet cusp reposed in her lap.

Cugel seized it, for a moment stared down into the exquisite face and wondered if he dared more. Firx thought not. Already Derwe Coreme was sighing and moving her head.

Cugel leapt from the boat, and only just in time. Had she seen him? He ran to a clump of reeds which grew by a pond, flung himself in the water. From here he saw the walking-boat halt while Derwe Coreme rose to her feet. She felt through the pink down for the cusp, then she looked all around the countryside. But the blood-red light of the low sun was in her eyes when she looked toward Cugel, and she saw only the reeds and the reflection of sun on water.

Angry and sullen as never before, she set the boat into motion. It walked, then cantered, then loped to the south.

Cugel emerged from the water, inspected the magic cusp, tucked it into his pouch, looked back toward Smolod. He started to walk south, then paused. He took the cusp from his pocket, closed his left eye, held the cusp to his right. There rose the palaces, tier on tier, tower above tower, the gardens hanging down the terraces . . . Cugel would have stared a long time but Firx became restive.

Cugel returned the cusp to his pouch, once again set his face to the south, for the long journey back to Almery.

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